

FATAL ATTRACTIONS: AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS & THE AIDS CRISIS



A MASTER'S FINAL PROJECT FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF AMERICAN STUDIES

Sean A. Guynes



FATAL ATTRACTIONS: AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS AND THE AIDS CRISIS

A Master's Final Project Presented

by

SEAN A. GUYNES

Submitted to the Department of American Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

June 2015

American Studies Program

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Cover design after Alaniz (2014).
Cover art by Richard Bennett,
Uncanny X-Men #303 (August 1993),
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Art below from *7 Miles A Second*,
story by David Wojnarowicz,
art by James Romberger
and Marguerite Van Cook (1996).

ABSTRACT

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June 2015

Sean A. Guynes, B.A., Western Washington University
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Advisor: Aaron Lecklider, Ph.D.
Second Reader: Rachel Rubin, Ph.D.

Between 1988 and 1994 American comic books engaged the politics, problematics, and crises of the AIDS epidemic by inserting the virus and its social, cultural, and epidemiological effects on gay men into the four-color fantasies of the superhero genre. As the comic-book industry was undergoing major internal changes that allowed for more mature, adult storylines, creators challenged the Comics Code Authority's 1954 sanction against the representation of homosexuality to create, for the first time, openly gay characters. Creators' efforts were driven by a desire to recognize the reality of gay men's lived experiences, especially crucial in the epidemic time of the AIDS crisis. Through mainstream superhero comic books a small body of conscientious writers and artists confronted stereotypes and misinformation about HIV/AIDS, championed gay men's rights, and fought homophobia. Comic-book creators developed a complex, sustained, and lively conversation about HIV/AIDS, gay men, and PWAs that was unprecedented both in the history of comic books and of other forms of popular culture.



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For Cady

I “Seven Miles A Second”: AIDS and Comic Books in Epidemic Time

In January 1992 a respected Canadian army veteran broke into the intensive care ward of Toronto General Hospital. The veteran, Major Louis Saddler, attempted the murder of Joanne Beaubier, an infant whose recent AIDS diagnosis had become the subject of national headlines, the impetus of a groundswell campaign to increase AIDS awareness and prevention in the Canadian public school system. Joanne’s murder was forestalled when her adoptive father, prominent public figure Jean-Paul Beaubier, discovered Saddler. In the course of the ensuing fistfight Saddler’s motives were made clear: his own son had recently died from AIDS-related complications and, unlike Beaubier’s adopted daughter, Saddler’s son Michael “was *gay*--so people didn’t afford him the *luxury* of being ‘innocent.’” Motivated by Saddler’s grief, and ashamed of the lack of public empathy for the homosexual experience of the AIDS crisis, Beaubier declined to press charges. Joanne died shortly after the incident, from AIDS-related complications, leading a despondent Beaubier to hold a press conference in which he “outed” himself as gay and publicly affirmed, in the voice of ACT UP, his devotion to fight the silence that equaled death. The superheroic feats, *noms de guerre*, and colorful spandex extracted, the story above abridges the plot of a comic book, “The Walking Wounded” (*Alpha Flight*, vol. 1, #106, Mar. 1992, Lobdell/Pacella, Marvel Comics), published in 1992 and feted by newspapers in the United States and Canada as a harbinger of progressive social change for gay men.¹

1. This paper follows the most recent edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, except in the citation of comic books. See the bibliography for a discussion of my citation practices. Quotations in the previous paragraph are from “The Walking Wounded,” unusual punctuation and emphases in original, some emphases omitted. All punctuation and emphases in future comic book quotations should be considered in original unless otherwise noted; “/” (forward slash) denotes a word balloon or panel break in the narration. Note also that the month of publication cited for a given comic is always the “cover date” printed on the comic. Industry standards since the early 20th century have mandated marking the cover date as several months after the actual date of publication, such that a comic appearing in January 1992 will be cover-dated March 1992. Where appropriate I mention the actual month of publication *in situ* if corroborated by other evidence, e.g. newspapers.

“The Walking Wounded” is paradigmatic of the popular cultural and especially the comic-book discourse on AIDS, and reflects the growing concern on the part of gay men and their allies about gay men’s visibility in the cultural moment of the AIDS crisis. During a moment of intense public interest in AIDS what otherwise might have been a forgettable comic, one of dozens published in March 1992, became a media sensation, reviewed in newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Seattle Times*, and Canada’s *The Globe and Mail*, as well as by the *Associated Press* and its subscribers—a newsprint chorus eagerly harmonizing the tune of gay acceptance.² The instantaneous and positive media response to Northstar’s coming out was in part galvanized by growing media coverage of HIV/AIDS, gay community and AIDS activist efforts, and government responses (or lack thereof) to the epidemic in the late 1980s and the 1990s, as well as by the growing public awareness of the staggering toll the AIDS crisis had reaped within just a decade.³ But the success of “The Walking Wounded” also suggests a larger discourse about the intertwined issues of AIDS and gay visibility, one already well underway in comic books and among their creators and consumers by 1992.⁴

In this essay I theorize the interconnections among the popular fantasies of superhero comic books, the social and political formations of the AIDS crisis, and representations of gay men and

2. While Northstar’s sexual identity was the first to garner major public attention—and somewhat strangely so, considering his less-than-marquee status at Marvel—the previous year DC “outed” the Pied Piper, a former supervillain, turned friend, of the Flash, in “Fast Friends” (*Flash*, vol. 2, #53, Aug. 1991, Messner-Loebs/LaRocque, DC Comics), and sustained a conversation about his identity over several issues, winning acclaim from GLAAD and garnering its first “Outstanding Comic Book” award.

3. amFar, The Foundation for AIDS Research places the cumulative death toll in the United States at 194,476 by the end of 1992, with 245,147 cases reported. “Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic,” amFar, The Foundation for AIDS Research, last modified 2011, <http://www.amfar.org/thirty-years-of-hiv/aids-snapshots-of-an-epidemic>. Their data are drawn from the most comprehensive, retrospective tabulation of nationwide reports of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and cases, and as such are often much higher than statistics reported *in tempore*.

4. On Northstar’s sexuality and its anticipation by fans see Gareth Schott, “From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The Sexual Identity of Comic Superheroes,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 1.1 (June 2010): 17-29; Ben Bolling, “The U.S. HIV/AIDS Crisis and the Negotiation of Queer Identity in Superhero Comics, or, Is Northstar Still a Fairy?” *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology*, ed. Matthew Pustz (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012): 202-219; Andy Mangels, “Out of the Closet and into the Comics: Gays in Comics: The Creations and the Creators, Part I,” *Amazing Heroes* 143 (June 15, 1988): 39-54, esp. 44.

PWAs (people with AIDS). I trace the dominant trends comic-book creators used to address the AIDS crisis through their unique, larger-than-life medium. Their creators plotted the virus and the HIV/AIDS affected into tales of fantastic possibility and melodramatic superheroism, wherein the conventions of comic-book fantasy allowed cures to be found, villains could render homophobia villainous, and superheroic dialogue could offer health education. Owing to their origins in comic strips of the early 20th century, mainstream comics and especially superhero comic books have been popularly associated with youth, despite occasional protestation from creators and in spite of growing evidence in the mid to late 1980s that more adults than children were consuming comic books.⁵ Throughout their history, comic books' association with the superhero genre has rendered them a particularly important location for political signification. It is on the four-color pages of mainstream comics (and, more recently, on film and television) where characters such as Captain America, Batman, the Avengers, and Superman embody the U.S. nation state on a domestic, international, and inter-galactic scale. The superhero's signifying function outside of comics—as the invulnerable and morally righteous righter of wrongs—as well as the superhero's shifting political valences within the medium throughout the postwar era, make comic books vital to the study of popular social, cultural, and political formations.⁶

5. By “mainstream” comics I mean comic books, often of the superhero genre, that were subject to the Comics Code Authority of 1954 until its dissolution in 2011; that are produced by companies such as Marvel and DC Comics, who in turn are owned by corporate conglomerates; and that are typically the result of multiple creators working under the oversight of editors charged with maintaining the intellectual properties (the characters) that constitute comic book companies' major revenue streams. “Comics,” plural, or “comic,” singular, are synonymous with “comic books” and “comic book,” respectively; “comics,” singular, refers to the medium.

6. On the superhero and its metaphors, see Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin, TX: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), 231-234. Despite sporting a somewhat sensationalist title and being published by a non-academic press, Coogan's study—the product of a dissertation in American Studies at Michigan State University—is regarded by serious scholars of comics as one of the key studies of the superhero genre. See José Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi), 7 for a discussion of its position in relation to other studies.

Comic books are well suited to cultural historical inquiry,⁷ particularly because they provide a unique, visual-textual hybrid archive through which to glimpse transformations in the visibility, and thus the history, of social categories.⁸ Like television and film, comic books are a popular visual medium. However, with the exception of a brief moment in the 1950s when comics came under fire for their purported “sex perversion,”⁹ comic books’ lower standing in the postwar U.S. cultural hierarchy and their increasingly specialized audience has meant greater freedom from the moralizing scrutiny that befell televisual and filmic attempts to narrate the lives of gay men.¹⁰ In fact, the explosion onto the comics scene of gay male characters in the late 1980s made for very little controversy, so little that news media, fans, and scholars alike have given scant attention (excepting “The Walking Wounded”) to the “gay” comics produced between 1988 and 1994—a period whose otherwise unremarkable brevity is conversely matched by its significance as a “substantive moment” in what sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters terms the “gaying of American

7. For critical discussions of comic books’ place in, and importance to the goals of, cultural and media studies see Angela Ndalani, “Why Comics Studies?” *Cinema Journal*, 50.3 (Spring 2011): 113-117; Daniel Stein, Christina Meyer, and Micha Edlich, “Introduction: American Comic Books and Graphic Novels,” *American Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, spec. issue of *Amerikanstudien/American Studies*, 56.4 (2011): 501-529.

8. In fact, the visibility or lack thereof of social, political, and economic “others” is a defining element in the politics of comic-book creation and consumption. Concerns about the visibility of “others” in comic books often point to the relevance of discussions of equality at times when social justice movements are particularly active. Such was the case when Dennis O’Neil and Neal Adams, self-identified partisans of the New Left, confronted white privilege and racial injustice in the pages of the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* comic-book series in the early 1970s, ultimately putting a black man, John Stewart, behind the mask of the Green Lantern. See Dennis O’Neil (w) and Neal Adams (a), *Green Lantern/Green Arrow, Vol 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2004).

9. Quote is from the Comics Code Authority (CCA), an industry-regulating code created in 1954, which is quoted in Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 316.

10. For a discussion of the “stigma” of comics see Paul Lopes, “Culture and Stigma: Popular Culture and the Case of Comic Books,” *Sociological Forum*, 21.3 (September 2006): 387-414. Important monographs on gay (and, more recently, queer) visibility in film and on television include Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Gay and Lesbian Film* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Revised ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); major anthologies on gay/queer visibility in popular culture include Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) and Thomas Peele, *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

culture.”¹¹ Though not every comic with a gay character dealt explicitly with the AIDS crisis, the association between gay men and AIDS was nonetheless a symbolically powerful one in American popular culture. As literary scholar James W. Jones observes, “it is impossible to read a piece of fiction about gay men in the present [1993] and not assume AIDS is going to make its presence felt one way or another.”¹² The impossibility of decontextualizing AIDS from its gay referents in not just literature but also American popular culture meant that the presence of gay characters raised questions about the position of AIDS on and beyond comic books’ pages.

That comics creators rallied to engage the politics of AIDS and the fact of its disproportionate impact on gay men was not unprecedented. Since the early 1960s, when DC Comics and later Marvel Comics succeeded in reviving the superhero genre, mainstream comic books have engaged a constant critique of the (American) body and its racial, sexual, and gender politics. Mainstream comics creators disrupted what comics scholar José Alaniz describes as the superhero genre’s pre-war and wartime idealization of the “fantastic, quasi-eugenicist apotheosis of the perfected [male] body,” and in doing so demonstrated that the visibility of the (super)body was inseparable from its political dimensions.¹³ Similarly, comics scholar Charles Hatfield observes of the same period that heroes’ “superpowers were counterbalanced by deformities, disabilities or social stigmas”; to comic-book writer Grant Morrison growing up in the 1960s, “the breakdown of the superheroic hard body...was occurring everywhere.”¹⁴ This breakdown is

11. In *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), Suzanna Danuta Walters refers to the revolutionary, even utopian, capacity of gay visibility in “substantive moments...when we glimpse exciting possibility for both gays and straights in the gaying of American culture, possibilities for reworking out limited notions of family, sex, love, intimacy, civic life, politics” (26).

12. James W. Jones, “Refusing the Name: The Absence of AIDS in Recent American Gay Male Fiction,” *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 225-243; quote from 229.

13. For a prolonged discussion of super-bodies see Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*; quote from 35.

14. Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 116; Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 86.

especially prevalent in the comics by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko at Marvel—comics such as *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *The X-Men*, which featured bodily abnormalities as the locus of superheroes’ powers. Cultural historian Ramzi Fawaz argues that from the 1960s onward creators shaped the discursive field of comics into “a space for modeling new modes of radical critique that offered alternatives to direct-action politics and the discourse of civil liberties.” Fawaz reads postwar superhero comics as a manifestation of the counterculture’s various political formations, including liberal and radical feminisms and gay liberation, and the superhero as a figure whose powers “literally materialized these ways of being as an extension of the self.” Extending a Marxist critique of fantastic literature to superhero comic books, Fawaz establishes the “popular fantasy” of the superhero as a powerful tool for the articulation of political worldmaking projects.¹⁵

Comic books were unique among the discursive practices of the AIDS epidemic. Comics such as “The Walking Wounded” were more than topical showpieces responding to current events. They were the culmination of a decades-long struggle by comics artists to incorporate gay characters into their narratives following the establishment of the industry-regulating Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1954, which among other things stipulated that “sex perversion [i.e. homosexuality] or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.”¹⁶ The CCA’s anti-homosexual censorship took on symbolic necessity during what historian Whitney Strub names an era of

15. Ramzi Fawaz, “‘Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!’: Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America,” *Speculative Fictions*, spec. issue of *American Literature*, 83.2 (June 2011): 355-388; quotes from 357.

16. CCA quoted in Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 316. For studies of the CCA see David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005); Carol A. Tilley, “Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics,” *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* 47.4 (2012): 383-413; and, of course, Fredric Wertham’s own *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today’s Youth* (New York: Irwin & Company, 1954).

“masculinized nationalism” and feminine “containment on the homefront,” and straightened out representations of gay men, lesbian women, and others—crossdressers, transsexuals, ‘loose’ women—whose deviances seemed to threaten the fragile balance of postwar gender roles.¹⁷ But the Code’s policing of heteronormativity was nearly immediately subverted, in part due to the inborn queerness of the superhero figure itself and of the superhero’s (often teenage, same-sex) sidekick, but also because of creators’ efforts to play with normative social roles through the fantastical comics genres.¹⁸ Creators like Steve Ditko could thus get away with a story like “The Man Who Stepped Out From A Cloud” (*Out of This World*, vol. 1, #5, Sep. 1957, Charlton Comics), about a dashing alien stranger whisking a lonely boy off to a welcoming planet populated with happy, snappily dressed men. Over the next three decades creators grew bolder in their presentation of gay characters, who became more prevalent and more realistic from the mid-1980s

17. Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 13. Strub sets the 1954 Senate hearings about comics’ influence on juvenile delinquency as the frame for later cultural conflict over pornography.

18. Neil Shyminsky suggests that in the context of the U.S.’s Cold War anxieties about masculinity, the subject position of the superhero’s sidekick—a generic figure nearly as old as the superhero itself and most famously represented by Batman’s teenage protégé Robin and “Superman’s pal” Jimmy Olsen—simultaneously demarcates and blurs the boundaries between homosociality and homosexuality. This is because at the most basic level the male superhero upholds dominant discourses of nation, sexuality, gender, race, class, and ability while also subverting them vis-à-vis the otherness that renders him superhuman. In addition, a number of scholars have observed that it is not so much the superpowers but rather the costumed dual identity of the superhero that renders him suspect. Scott Bukatman contends that “[o]ur costumed vigilante is...a dandy, a flamboyant, flamboyantly powered, urban male, who, if not for his never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way, would probably be ordered to ‘just move it along.’” Moreover, the superhero’s secret identity—and his worry that someone will discover it—resemble the closet. The superhero’s masculinity is therefore always already suspect. Andy Medhurst has noted, for example, that “if one wants to take Batman as a Real Man, the biggest stumbling block has always been Robin.” Thus, the assertion of the superhero’s always imperiled status as the embodiment of American masculinity relies in part on the contrasting role of his adolescent sidekick. The superhero’s tensions with a historically constructed hegemonic masculinity are thus structured by some of the genre’s most iconic conventions, allowing for “queer readings” whenever a man leaves behind “the visual drabness of his closet” to don four-color tights. See Neil Shyminsky, “‘Gay’ Sidekicks: Queer Anxiety and the Narrative Straightening of the Superhero,” *Men and Masculinities* 14.3 (August 2001): 288-308; Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), quote from 216, and quote about the drabness of the closet from 216 also; Andy Medhurst, “Batman, Deviance, and Camp,” *The Many Lives of The Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, eds. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-163, quote from 159.

onward,¹⁹ ultimately allowing the emergence of an AIDS discourse concurrent with major changes internal to the comic-book industry that encouraged creators to take more risks, and produce more “mature” works of comics art.²⁰

To frame the history of comic books’ contribution to the broader public discourses of AIDS and gay men’s visibility in “epidemic time,”²¹ I build on Fawaz’s description of the superhero genre as “the paradigmatic example of American popular fantasy.” Popular fantasy describes “expressions of literary and cultural enchantment that suture together current social and political realities and impossible happenings, producing widely shared political myths that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires or modes of sociality for which no legible discourses yet exist.” Popular fantasy offers a way to understand the superhero genre as always purposively political, and emphasizes comic books’ ability to represent the sometimes conflicted, occasionally ambiguous, but nonetheless radical political yearnings of creators as they turned their craft to the AIDS crisis and its effects in gay men’s lives. Through progressive, if sometimes flawed, narratives, comic-book creators deployed popular fantasy as a means of representing the personal, social, moral, and ethical dilemmas that confronted heterosexuals and gay men alike as thousands

19. For a study of the means by which homosexuality has been metaphorized and represented in comics between 1985 and 2002 see Susannah Mandel, “Mask and Closet, Or, ‘Under the Hood’: Metaphors and Representations of Homosexuality in American Superhero Comics After 1985” (master’s thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003).

20. See the Appendix for a full list of comics with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters, issues, and themes published between 1954 and 2004. It is interesting, perhaps concerning, to note that gay men (and lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals) were disincluded from radical pushes in the comics industry to include racial, gender, economically disadvantaged, and even differently abled others in superhero comics of the 1970s—what Alaniz calls the “relevance movement” (*Death, Disability, and the Superhero*, 138). Bradford Wright, in *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), similarly describes the relevance movement as “a proliferation of self-consciously leftist comic book explorations of political and social issues” (233).

21. Julian Gill-Peterson, “Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS: Remembering ACT UP/New York and an Ethics for an Epidemic,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 19.3 (2013): 279-300. Gill-Peterson splices the history of AIDS into two temporalities, the earlier being the “epidemic time,” the “crisis” years of AIDS, in contradistinction to the present, “post-AIDS age” of “endemic time,” when HIV/AIDS has become a manageable medical condition, has passed out of public interest, and has been depoliticized in the U.S. as a result of its becoming a transnational medical issue.

of PWAs continued to die, as the government failed to respond, and as the unaffected turned a blind eye.²²

Between 1988 and 1994 comic-book creators and their superheroes challenged AIDS on the fictional battlescapes of four-color-process newspaper print, where they confronted the virus itself and fought on behalf of those affected/infected. The following sections provide an account of comics creators' uses of popular fantasy in service of politicizing and critiquing the AIDS crisis. In the first section I chart the ways in which superheroes combatted the virus as PWAs themselves, as friends and partners of PWAs, or as allegorical "victims" of viruses uncannily similar to HIV/AIDS. In the next section I focus on the role of the superhero as guardian and avenger of fictional gay men and PWAs—stories made possible only because of the rising number of gay male characters in comic books of the period. I conclude by offering a reading of the AIDS discourse in comics as it returns nearly a decade later in a superhero comic-book story arc written by Judd Winick. In the context of the growing body of research on gay visibility and the history of AIDS in the United States, my readings demonstrate that the oft ignored comics medium took seriously the power of superheroes to engage, challenge, and educate audiences during a watershed moment in the history of homosexuality in America.

II "Going through the Motions": AIDS and the Superhero

Gay activism responded nearly instantaneously to the 1981 discovery of the "gay related immune-deficiency" that would come to be known as AIDS. By 1982 New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) had formed in order to offer financial, legal, and health-related services to gay persons with AIDS. Throughout the 1980s, in gay community newspapers, in performance venues, in literary circles, and even on cruising strips, AIDS became an urgent topic of discussion,

22. Description of "popular fantasy" is from Fawaz, "'Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!'" 359.

one that, to radical activists, was the primary ethical and political concern for gay men. But for most of the 1980s the outcry against AIDS was ignored in the political arena as public officials—notably New York City mayor Ed Koch—and the Reagan administration itself stonewalled activists.²³ As the number of AIDS-related deaths continued to more than double with every successive year, AIDS activists became militant and highly organized in their reproach of government and public inaction. Groups such as ACT UP, founded in 1987, turned direct action and civil disobedience against institutions that were increasingly being perceived among PWAs as perpetrators of a genocide.²⁴ The late 1980s stands apart as a flashpoint in the history of gay life and visibility in America. The militant responses of PWAs in the late 1980s ultimately created a better organized, more visible, and more politically engaged gay community and laid the groundwork for activists of the following decade to reclaim “queer” as an identity category. Alloyed by the increasingly confrontational tenor of AIDS activism by the late 1980s, broader changes in media coverage and public awareness of AIDS from 1985 onward transformed the epidemic into a nationwide crisis that was ripe for adaption to the adventures of comic-book superheroes.

23. On Ed Koch see “Ed Koch: 12 Years as Mayor, A Lifetime in the Closet,” *Gay City News*, 3 February 2013, <http://gaycitynews.nyc/ed-koch-12-years-as-mayor-a-lifetime-in-the-closet>. Ronald Reagan’s first public mention of AIDS occurred at a September 17, 1985, news conference: “The President’s News Conference: September 17, 1985,” *Public Papers of the President: Ronald Reagan, 1981-1989*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/91785c.htm>.

24. For the history of ACT UP see Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Douglas Crimp with Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demographics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990); and Jeffrey Edward, “AIDS, Race, and the Rise and Decline of a Militant Oppositional Lesbian and Gay Politics in the US,” *New Political Science*, 22.4 (2000): 485-596. Talk of “genocide” among AIDS activists is reflected in titles of works such as Larry Kramer’s *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of An AIDS Activist* (1989), John Lauritsen’s *The AIDS War: Propaganda, Profiteering, and Genocide from the Medical Industrial Complex* (1993), and Tim Barrus’s *Genocide: The Anthology* (1988). Gould provides an analysis of activists’ genocide rhetoric, which she identifies as a framing device for finessing fear, grief, and anger into direct action (165-172); moreover, citing John D’Emilio’s *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1992), she points to the long history of gay activism’s use of holocaustal imagery (167).

The popular fantasy of the superhero allowed creators to distill their political beliefs through the genre's eponymous figure, to point to the superhero's actions as a framework for a moral and just response to AIDS. Comic-book series such as DC's *The New Guardians* and Marvel's X-Men comics contextualized for readers the stakes of the AIDS epidemic, which by the turn of the 1980s was increasingly understood as a "crisis." From the late 1980s into the 1990s comics book narratives and AIDS activism alike poured their energies into the late-postmodern rhetorics of apocalypse.²⁵ Activist organizations, especially ACT UP, and outspoken individuals like Larry Kramer deployed apocalypticism as a "resistive discourse" in art, literature, protest, performance, and journalism.²⁶ At the same time apocalyptic crisis also characterized the dominant impulses in U.S. culture of the "long nineties." As Marxist cultural critic Phillip Wegner has shown, culture workers in the period between 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and 2001 (the fall of the WTC towers) were fascinated with cataclysm, dystopia, and the apocalypse, in part because, for some, the end of the Cold War controversially signaled "the end of history" and the abeyance of alternatives to capitalism.²⁷ Not surprisingly, from the mid-1980s publication of the aptly named *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (vol. 1, #1-12, Apr. 1985-Mar. 1986, Wolfman/Pérez, DC Comics) series, which narrated the destruction of thousands of universes at the hands of the matter-devouring Anti-

25. In *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), Phillip Wegner designates the "long nineties" as "late" postmodernism, in contradistinction to postmodernism (no qualifying adjective) or "high" postmodernism. By "late" he suggest that the 1990s were a transitional period out of postmodernism and into something new, something many critics have dubbed "the contemporary"; in this way, "late" postmodernism is not unlike "late modernism" according to Fredric Jameson, which Wegner describes as "a kind of vanishing mediator in the ultimate emergence of postmodernism" in the 1960s (5). But whereas late modernism saw a waning of political radicalism, late postmodernism witnessed its reinvigoration.

26. See Thomas L. Long, *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005) for a prolonged examination of apocalyptic rhetoric in AIDS-related discourse. Discussion of apocalypticism as "resistive discourse" on 13. Several essays in the early anthology *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), edited by Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, describe uses of apocalyptic rhetoric in gay literature and culture.

27. Wegner, *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001*; Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, 16 (Summer 1989): 3-18.

Monitor, and well into the 1990s, apocalyptic scenarios typified comic-book storylines, leading fans, critics, and creators to label the era the “Dark Age.”²⁸

Working through the crisis prone superhero comics of the late 1980s—exemplified by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* and Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, both published in 1986 by DC—creators turned their attention to the AIDS epidemic.²⁹ At its height in the late 1980s and until it began to be seen as an increasingly global epidemic circa 1993, AIDS was met with an unprecedented interest on the part of comics creators, many of whom were young, socially conscious, politically engaged men living and working in New York, one of the social and cultural epicenters of the epidemic. For those who wrote/drew gay characters, the decision was made out of a sense of urgency to represent gay men as part of comic-book universes, occasionally as superheroes but more often as “normal” people, people who lived in the world, with whom readers interacted on a daily basis, and whose lives were disproportionately negatively impacted by the virus. After decades existing in a subtextual closet of metaphors, tropes, and stereotypes, in 1988 openly gay characters exploded into the pages of superhero comics, leading one clever critic to dub it “the gayest year in comic book history.”³⁰ Nearly two dozen comics with explicitly LGBT

28. For a useful, if somewhat uncritical, discussion of the “Dark Age” see Mark Voger, *The Dark Age: Grim, Great & Gimmicky Post-Modern Comics* (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006); Paul Levitz, *The Dark Age of DC Comics* (Los Angeles: Taschen Books, 2015). Writing during the late 1980s, critic Brad Balfour noted that comics appeared to be “screaming into adulthood.” See Balfour et al., “Comics,” cover story of *Spin* 4.5 (August 1988): 40-50; quote from 48.

29. For discussions of the development of “literary” comic books such as *Watchmen*, and how it and similarly self-critical superhero comics (and their creators) revolutionized the comic-book industry in the late 1980s and the 1990s concurrent with the rise and solidification of the comic-book direct market, see Paul Williams and James Lyons, eds., *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); as well as selected portions of Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), esp. 138-148; Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 138-148. Mike S. DuBose takes a slightly different approach, questioning instead the rise of (violent) vigilantism as a mode of superheroism in comics of the same period. See DuBose, “Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40.6 (2007): 915-935.

30. It should be noted that the “gay” explosion occurred the year after AIDS media coverage peaked at 5,000 print and broadcast stories, accounting for twelve percent of all media coverage between 1981 and 2002. See Mollyann Brodie et al., “AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic, 1981-2002,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, supplement (March/April 2004): 1-8. Quote from the Queer Comics Historian, “1988: The Gayest Year in

characters were published that year; unsurprisingly, the majority featured gay men and addressed HIV/AIDS in some narrative capacity. Many were passing representations, like “Housewarming Party” (*The Spectre*, vol. 2, #11, Feb. 1988, Moench/Morrow, DC Comics), on a single page of which the superhero Dr. Fate saves gay rights protesters—toting signs with the slogan “Act now!”—from a falling building; other comics, however, took more sustained liberties.

Perhaps the most significant comic book of the 1988 “gay” explosion was DC’s “mature” (i.e. non-CCA approved) series *The New Guardians*, which promised heroes whose diversity would springboard its fictional world’s—and, by extension, its readers’ own—cultural, political, and biological evolution into the next millennium.³¹ *Guardians* was one of DC’s more politicized comics in the late 1980s, addressing issues as varied and controversial as South African apartheid, U.S. intervention in Latin America, late-Cold War U.S.-Soviet relations, and, most significantly, the domestic and global contexts of the AIDS epidemic. Not only did *Guardians* include a flamboyant gay character, the Peruvian superhero-magician Extraño, whose sexuality was discussed often and with candor, and who elicited positive responses from readers in the comic’s letter columns, but AIDS was a dominant plot point throughout the series. The decision to make AIDS a locus of narrative conflict for the New Guardians was a conscious effort by the series’ initial writer, Steve Englehart, to bring awareness to the epidemic but also to denote its overwhelming impact on gay men. In an interview with gay comics critic Andy Mangels, Englehart offered the opinion that to ignore AIDS would be irresponsible: “If I were writing a

Comic Book History,” *Queer Comics History*, last modified 25 November 2013, <http://blog.queercomics.info/2013/11/1988-gayest-year-in-comic-book-history.html>.

31. *The New Guardians*’ origin lies in the late 1987 comic-book series *Millennium*, published in eight weekly installments that detailed the emergence of a billions-of-years-old cult that attempts to prevent the universe’s immortal Old Guardians from bringing forth their replacements, the New Guardians. Caped in all the conventions of the superhero genre, *Millennium* introduces the unlikely cast of *Guardians*: Jet, a Jamaican woman and immigrant to “fascist Britain”; Gloss, a communist Chinese woman; Ram, a former Japanese businessman; Floronic Man, an extradimensional plant-man; Betty Clawman, an Australian aboriginal; Harbinger, a white woman raised on a space station; and Extraño, an openly gay man from Peru.

story about a homosexual in 1988 and didn't do a story on AIDS, [I'm] not really doing 1988.” Englehart's insistence on showcasing the virus's damage to gay communities is significant because it countered the contemporary emphasis on heterosexuals' victimization by AIDS, ignoring and even demonizing the “fringe” populations through which AIDS originally spread.³² Communications scholar Simon Watney reasoned that “AIDS is effectively being used as a pretext throughout the West to ‘justify’ calls for increasing legislation and regulation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable.” In a now-classic response to Watney, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani similarly claimed that AIDS was “treated like an unprecedented sexual threat” by mainstream media, political profiteers, and opportunistic evangelists. Moreover, this media discourse, both on account of its magnitude and tone, “made the oppression of gay men seem like a moral imperative.”³³

The *Guardians* AIDS storyline challenged the moral imperative Bersani identifies by familiarizing readers with a sympathetic gay character, and through that lens transformed the comic into a platform for HIV/AIDS education. The storyline began in “The New Guardians” (*The New Guardians*, vol. 1, #1, Sep. 1988, Englehart/Staton), when the Hemo-Goblin, a vampire genetically manufactured to infect its victims with AIDS, is sent by the fictional South African apartheid dictator Janwillem Kroef to infect/murder the Guardians. In the battle with Hemo-Goblin three characters are infected with HIV: Extraño; Jet, a Jamaican woman from “fascist Britain”; and Harbinger, a white woman who was raised by an immortal alien.³⁴ Later, in “After-Burn” (*The*

32. Englehart's use of AIDS and a gay character were points of major contention between him and the editorial staff at DC, particularly *Guardians*' editor Andy Helfer. As a result, Englehart opted to quit *Guardians*. Englehart interview quoted in Mangels, “Out of the Closet and into the Comics: Gays in Comics: The Creations and the Creators, Part II,” *Amazing Heroes*, 144 (July 1, 1988): 47-66, quote from 51.

33. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3. Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp, spec. issue of *October*, 43 (Winter 1987): 197-222, quotes from 198, 204.

34. These characters are introduced in “Under” (*Millennium*, vol. 1, #2, Jan. 1988, Englehart/Staton, DC Comics).

New Guardians, vol. 1, #3, Nov. 1988, Bates/Staton, DC Comics), the three PWAs visit an HIV clinic where a homophobic protest is taking place. There, they learn how HIV is contracted and how it progresses to AIDS. They also visit an HIV support group and listen to personal stories about living with the virus. One woman tells her story of contracting HIV through drug use. A gay man describes telling his family, to whom the diagnosis revealed his closeted identity, and another gay man recounts the love and support given him by his partner and friends in the gay community. Through these voices writer Cary Bates emphasizes that HIV is not a death sentence, but that people “live with AIDS”—a phrase popularized in the rhetoric of AIDS activism. One of the men even reminds readers that “*life-styles* don’t cause diseases-- / --*germs* do.” In this issue it is also revealed that Jet’s condition has progressed to “full-blown” AIDS.

Jet’s carefully positioned identity allows her to take on multiple signifiers of the AIDS crisis, markers of social positions that make her character all the more significant since it is Jet—and not the gay character, Extraño—whose diagnosis develops into AIDS and causes her death. Jet is both a woman and more specifically a black Caribbean expatriate. While her Jamaican origin is denoted in the second issue of *Millennium* (“Under,” vol. 1, Jan. 1988, Englehart/Staton, DC Comics), a series that served as the collective origin story for the *New Guardians*, it is also connoted by Englehart’s and Bates’s attempts to write Jet’s script in patois—“Sitting aroun’ ain’t my *style*-- / --bot I not in de mood ta *socialize*!”—which evokes a borderline racist stereotype, at the very least is a caricature.³⁵ Jet’s identity points to U.S. hysteria about the alleged Caribbean origins of AIDS and as a woman (of color) with AIDS, Jet’s struggle prefigures wider public acknowledgment of women’s varied experiences of the epidemic. Organized responses to women’s erasure from the dominant AIDS narratives came to the fore of AIDS activism in 1988

35. Quote from “The New Guardians” (*The New Guardians*, vol. 1, #1, Sep. 1988, Englehart/Staton).

following the publication of *Cosmopolitan's* "Reassuring about AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why *You* May Not Be at Risk." The article, by psychiatrist Robert E. Gould, "assured" readers that American women with healthy vaginas would not be infected with HIV so long as they practiced "ordinary sexual intercourse" and not the "brutal way" in which "many men in Africa take their women."³⁶ ACT UP responded immediately by protesting *Cosmopolitan's* offices in January 1988, and through their campaign brought attention to the fact that women, especially women of color, were indeed at risk.³⁷

By the sixth issue of the series, "Fatal Pursuits" (*The New Guardians*, vol. 1, #6, Holiday 1988, Bates/Staton), believing that a prolonged death from AIDS-related complication is forthcoming, Jet sacrifices herself in a last-ditch effort to save Earth from an alien invasion. At Jet's funeral, Extraño gives a compelling, symbol-laden eulogy for his friend:

...She was not the *first* gallant soul to give up her *life* in the war against these *alien invaders*... / ...nor will she be the *last*. / Yet our courageous [Jet] was already in the throes of a life-and-death struggle on *another* battlefield. / A struggle her ravaged immune system would not permit her to win. / And yet, despite the agony she had to endure over the past few months... / throughout it all, her beautiful *spirit* remained indomitable.

Jet's death came quite literally at the instigation of space invaders, which Extraño likens to the immunological ravages of HIV. As Susan Sontag has argued, "in the era of Star Wars and Space

36. Robert E. Gould, "Reassuring about AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why *You* May Not Be at Risk," *Cosmopolitan* (January 1988): 146-204. Gould's article was written in part to explain away why AIDS proliferates in Africa among heterosexual people to greater extents than in the United States; his article is of course heavily racist in tone, going so far as to describe Africans' heterosexual sex practices as "close to rape by our standards." There were a number of contemporary responses to Gould's article beyond ACT UP, including *AIDS Patient Care*, 2.2 (April 1988), which included three articles responding to Gould, one of which was an interview with *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown. The ACT UP protest of *Cosmopolitan* magazine is covered in Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demographics*, 38-43. For an incredibly thorough contemporary study of the gendered narrative of AIDS see Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse: Current Contests for Meaning," *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, eds. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988): 191-267.

37. Take for example the Gran Fury poster distributed by ACT UP, titled *AIDS: 1 in 61*, which countered the erasure of women and people of color by exposing that "one in every sixty-one babies in New York City is born with AIDS." The answer to why the media pretends otherwise, the poster reveals, is "because these babies are black. These babies are Hispanic." The poster is displayed in Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demographics*, 42.

Invaders, AIDS has proved an ideally comprehensible illness,” one that is fashioned as a violent invader in “the language of political paranoia.”³⁸ At a formal level, Jet’s passing is, in the grand scheme of the superhero genre’s flippant treatment of death, all the more meaningful because unlike the vast majority of superheroes, sidekicks, and villains who “die,” Jet remains irrevocably dead.³⁹

But Jet’s death has even deeper resonances, simultaneously distancing gay men (here, Extraño) from the fatalistic AIDS discourse as it points to the heavy toll the virus was taking among women and people of color in the late 1980s.⁴⁰ In the democratizing hyperbole of superhero comics, Jet is a stand-in for all persons with AIDS—a purposefully broad, open-ended interpretation of who can and does become affected by HIV/AIDS. A chronotope presenting the scorched earth marred by Jet’s fatal explosion, the image of what remains in the wake of her death inscribes the story of an individual and a social category into the fictional landscape of the comic. This physical marking of AIDS-related death is reminiscent of the contemporary black-and-white photographs forming *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, taken in 1987 by David Wojnarowicz minutes after Peter Hujar’s death from AIDS-related complications. The images convey Wojnarowicz’s personal, emotional response to his partner’s death, but at the same time index what art critic Jennifer Doyle reads as “rage at the indifference of the public to the suffering of a generation” of

38. Susan Sontag, “*Illness as Metaphor*” and “*AIDS and Its Metaphors*” (New York: Picador, 2001), 106. Sontag does not italicize *Star Wars*, the film franchise, or *Space Invaders*, the arcade video game.

39. For a sustained study of death and dying in superhero comics see Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*, esp. 158-281. Moreover, unlike other superheroes who are involved in HIV/AIDS narratives (with the exception of the allegorical Legacy Virus; see below), Jet is the only superhero who succumbs to AIDS-related causes. Jet is, however, brought back to life in the later 2000s, most notably in the series *Checkmate*, vol. 2, where she appears with other characters from *The New Guardians*—this, after several universe- and company-wide reboots that effectively erased the internal history of her death from HIV/AIDS.

40. Take for example the ACT UP slogan “Women Don’t Get AIDS, They Just Die From It,” which was used at a demonstration at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in 1988 in order to bring attention to the ways in which medical definitions of AIDS made women sufferers invisible. For a study of the slogan and campaign see Alexis Shotwell, “‘Women Don’t Get AIDS, They Just Die From It’: Memory, Classification, and the Campaign to Change the Definition of AIDS,” *Hypatia*, 29.2 (Spring 2014): 509-525.

gay men.⁴¹ “Fatal Pursuits” is conspicuously absent an image of Jet’s body, probably in an effort to avoid the suggestion—already bandied about in the letter columns—that *The New Guardians* was “pushing” the AIDs agenda too vociferously.⁴² Extraño’s eulogy nonetheless emphatically reminds readers of the erasure of the human element from public conversations of death tolls and caseloads, Senate proceedings, and curative drug testing.

In the issue following Jet’s death, “Heartlands” (*The New Guardians*, vol. 1, #7, Feb. 1989, Bates/Staton, DC Comics), the series’ gay character, Extraño, returns to his hometown of Trujillo, Peru. There he has an emotional reunion with an old friend, to whom he reveals in untranslated Spanish that his diagnosis has progressed to AIDS (“Lo tengo”). While home Extraño visits the graves of friends and former lovers, all of whom died from AIDS-related causes. Trujillo, or rather its “gay” district, has been rendered a ghost town by the epidemic. Extraño’s fictionalized gay community metonymizes the experiences of gay communities everywhere in the late 1980s: with thousands already dead and many more thousands diagnosed every year, AIDS was, as many activists articulated it, an apocalypse. This brief glimpse at the global context of the AIDS crisis was the series’ final nod to the AIDS storyline begun by Steve Englehart in the first issue and continued by Cary Bates. Thereafter the series tamed Extraño’s flamboyancy, opting instead for an ironically queer macho aesthetic, and ceased all discussion of AIDS. Though *The New Guardians* only lasted twelve issues, its creators provided a highly unique account of PWAs in

41. *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* can be found in Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 127; quote *ibid.*

42. *The New Guardians*’ letter column is telling in other ways, since the letters betray a distinct interest among many readers—who run the gamut of identifying as gay, as PWAs, as friends/family of PWAs, and even as health professionals—about the role of HIV, and later AIDS, throughout the series. Nearly every letter is engaged with some critique of either Extraño’s homosexuality or his, Jet’s, and Harbinger’s HIV/AIDS diagnoses. For a useful discussion of letter columns in the study of comics, see Matthew J. Pustz, “‘Let’s Rap with Cap’: Fan Interaction in Comic Book Letter Pages,” *Inside the World of Comic Books*, ed. Jeffrey Klaehn (New York: Black Rose Books, 2007): 163-184; for a discussion of letter column responses to “coming out” narratives in comics see Morris E. Franklin III, “Coming Out in Comic Books: Letter Columns, Readers, and Gay and Lesbian Characters,” *Comics and Ideology*, eds. Matthew P. McAllister et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2009): 221-250.

comics form, consistently challenging stereotypes, misinformation, and prejudice about who gets HIV/AIDS, how they get it, what their lives are like, and how the reactions of persons without AIDS determine the experiences of those most affected. In the wake of the “gay” explosion of 1988 that *The New Guardians* helped define, the forty-five year ban on gay representation was officially struck from the Comics Code Authority in 1989, opening the way for comics of the early 1990s to more broadly engage gay characters and the AIDS crisis.

The early 1990s institutionalized AIDS in a mass discourse constituted of near-constant news media coverage (roughly 3,000 stories a year) joined by films and made-for-TV movies as diversely positioned in their relations to the gay community as *Philadelphia* (1993) and *Our Sons* (1991).⁴³ AIDS was also mythologized in widely circulated stories of heterosexual AIDS “victims,” the most prominent of whom was hemophiliac teenager Ryan White, who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion in the mid-1980s and was ostracized by his small-town Indiana community. After several years in the media spotlight as the poster child of heterosexual narratives about the epidemic, White died in April 1990.⁴⁴ HIV/AIDS was also integral to the third season of the popular reality television show *The Real World: San Francisco* (1994), which included the handsome twenty-two-year-old gay PWA and AIDS educator Pedro Zamora. So great was Zamora’s role in early 1990s American popular culture that President Bill Clinton spoke at a benefit for Pedro Zamora a month before his death in November 1994, stating, “Over the past few years, Pedro became a member of all of our families. Now no one in America can say they’ve

43. For media coverage statistics see Brodie et al., “AIDS at 21.” Paula A. Treichler’s “AIDS Narratives on Television: Whose Story?” *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 161-199 is an especially well-research article about the narrative life of AIDS on television—its uses, audiences, and implication in public discourse.

44. White’s “story of AIDS prejudice [won] hearts” from 1986 until his death in 1990, and caused public concern about AIDS to shift as it became clear that AIDS was a threat to heterosexuals. Quotes from John Strauss, “AIDS Schoolboy Back in Classroom but Judge Rules Against Him,” *Associated Press*, 21 February 1986; Tim Franklin, “Teen’s Story of AIDS Prejudice Wins Hearts,” *The Chicago Tribune*, 3 March 1988.

never known someone who's living with AIDS."⁴⁵ In comics, too, the AIDS discourse intensified. Taken up by Marvel Comics in January 1992 in the pages of *Alpha Flight* #106 and with less fanfare through passing mention in other titles, AIDS also emerged as major theme in the X-Men comics.

From the mid-1970s and into the late 1990s the X-Men was one of Marvel's most lucrative comic-book franchise. Led by the ongoing original series *Uncanny X-Men* (vol. 1), the franchise was attuned to the major artistic impulses of the "Dark Age" and was an especially high seller in its multiple incarnations. In July 1991, for example, the first issue of *X-Men* (vol. 2, Oct. 1991, Claremont/Lee, Marvel Comics) broke sales records at 8.3 million copies.⁴⁶ Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963, the X-Men were "mutants" whose genetic mutations bestowed superhuman capabilities, some of which manifested physically (e.g. as wings or blue fur), others of which remained hidden (e.g. telepathy, laser vision), allowing them to "pass" as non-mutant. The comics' positioning of mutanity in relation to "normal" humans allowed the X-Men to metaphorically embody social, cultural, and political "others." Throughout its history the "mutant metaphor" was purposively articulated by comics creators to minority group contexts, for example, to the racial tensions of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and of women's liberation in the 1970s. At other times mutanity was broadly constructed so as to make the X-Men a fluid signifier

45. Pedro Zamora's many accomplishments as an AIDS activist, including as a member of ACT UP and as a nationally recognized HIV/AIDS education lecturer, are detailed in Eric Morgenthaler's "Pedro's Story: Teen with AIDS Tries to Teach Youth Some Lessons for Life," *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 September 1991, published three years before Zamora appeared on *The Real World*. Bill Clinton quote from *The Real World: A Tribute to Pedro Zamora* (New York: MTV, 1994). The MTV tribute gives information about Zamora's testimonies before Congress and elsewhere on Capitol Hill. Zamora and Sasser's marriage was shown in "Love Rules," *The Real World III: San Francisco* (New York: MTV, 27 October 1994), which was arguably the first gay marriage shown on national television. Zamora's death was widely reported on; see, for example, Betsy Israel, "HIV, And Positive: Pedro Zamora of MTV's *Real World* Lived His Too-Brief Life to Its Limit," *People*, 42.22 (28 November 1994).

46. For sales numbers of *X-Men* #1 (vol. 2) see Joseph J. Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 12. The original X-Men series was titled *X-Men* from 1963 to 1981, when its name was changed, with issue #141, to *Uncanny X-Men*. October 1991's *X-Men* #1 launched the second volume to use that title. From 1991 onward *X-Men* (vol. 2) and *Uncanny X-Men* (vol. 1) were published alongside one another.

of any sort of prejudice, even the social ostracism from “coolness” felt by comics creators’ assumed audience: teenage male nerds.⁴⁷ The mutability of the mutant metaphor has opened the way for queer readings of the X-Men as well, which Fawaz deftly illustrates in his reading of X-Men comics in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly those written by Chris Claremont.⁴⁸ But while earlier X-Men comics covertly encoded queerness, comics historian Joseph J. Darowski argues that two early 1990s storylines, “X-Cutioner’s Song” (1992-1993) and “Fatal Attractions” (1993-1994), represent the first creator-intended usage of the X-Men’s mutanity as a metaphor for homosexuality.⁴⁹

“X-Cutioner’s Song” and “Fatal Attractions” rallied the fantastic affordances of the superhero genre and the metaphorical versatility of the X-Men’s mutanity to allegorize homosexuality, HIV, and the AIDS crisis. At the surface, however, “X-Cutioner’s Song” and “Fatal Attractions” are an interwoven epic of the X-Men’s perpetual struggle against their various and multiplicitous enemies—among them anti-mutant hate groups (Purifiers, Church of Humanity), anti-human mutant groups (Mutant Liberation Front, Acolytes), and archetypal supervillains whose vocation is mayhem (Apocalypse, Onslaught).⁵⁰ The twelve-issue “X-

47. What the “mutant metaphor” is meant to metaphorize is an object of some contention among fans, creators, and scholars, as Darowski’s monograph *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor* attests. Critically, Darowski cites dozens of interviews (his own and others’) in which X-Men franchise writers argue that the mutant metaphor is not meant to be read as a metaphorizing any single group’s struggles. For a discussion of the mutant metaphor in X-Men comics and films alike see Marc DiPaolo’s *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (New York: McFarland, 2011), esp. the chapter “Gay Rights, Civil Rights, and Nazism in the X-Men Universe,” 219-247.

48. Fawaz, “‘Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!’” In 1988 *New Mutants* (Marvel) artist Bill Sienkiewicz provided a unique reading that is attuned to the mutant metaphor’s versatility in the era of AIDS. At length, Sienkiewicz stated that “A lot of the religious factions scream about the link between AIDS and gays. Now heterosexuals and children can get it as well; it’s no longer seen as a gay disease. The paranoia and fear and misunderstanding are there. ‘There are the times that try men’s souls.’ . . . People tend not to want to be informed because that connotes a certain degree of responsibility and maybe a change in thinking. When they read about the mutant paranoia, it’s fifty times removed from the world, yet it’s still there. I think that’s more the link between the mutant stuff than anything else.” Quoted in Mangels, “Out of the Closet and into the Comics, Part I,” 46.

49. Darowski’s discussion of “X-Cutioner’s Song” and “Fatal Attractions” can be found in *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor*, 105-117.

50. “X-Cutioner’s Song” and “Fatal Attractions” are collected in trade paperbacks: Jaye Gardner, ed., *X-Men: X-Cutioner’s Song* (New York: Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc., 2001), collects *Uncanny X-Men* (vol. 1) #294-

Cutioner's Song" introduces a deranged mutant from the future, Stryfe, who travels back in time to the X-Men's present to assassinate the X-Men's leader, Professor Charles Xavier. Defeated by the X-Men at the end of the story arc, Stryfe releases the Legacy Virus, a bioweapon manufactured to kill mutants. Legacy begins to infect mutants all over the world beginning in the following thirty-one-issue crossover "Fatal Attractions," a major event marking the thirtieth anniversary of Marvel's X-Men franchise. The virus claims multiple lives throughout "Fatal Attractions" and remains an ongoing subplot to the Xavier-Magneto conflict.⁵¹

Legacy is a fantastical allegory for the AIDS virus and its effects on the gay community.⁵² By allegorizing AIDS and withholding the virus's name—a tactic that comics creators in years prior had not used in their critique of AIDS politics—X-Men writers unintentionally mirrored the dominant trend of early 1990s gay writers who normalized the presence of the virus in gay life by "refusing" its name.⁵³ The many deaths that occur as a result of Legacy throughout "Fatal Attractions" demonstrate its purposive resemblance to HIV and that virus's etiology. It is noted in the epilogue to "Legacies" (*Uncanny X-Men*, vol. 1, #300, May 1993, Lobdell/Romita, Jr./Peterson, Marvel Comics) that the virus affects each mutant differently, owing to the fact that the "X-Gene," the source of mutants' superpowers, manifests differently in each mutant. In much the same way, HIV and AIDS open up PWAs to an array of opportunistic infections, such that the

296; *X-Men* (vol. 2) #14-16; *X-Force* #16-18; *X-Factor* #84-86. Mark D. Beazley, ed., *X-Men: Fatal Attractions* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2012), collects *Uncanny X-Men* (vol. 1) #298-305, #315, Annual # 17; *X-Factor* #87-92; *X-Men Unlimited* #1-2; *X-Force* #25; *X-Men* (vol. 2) #25; *Wolverine* (vol. 1) #75; *Excalibur* #71.

51. The Legacy Virus is unveiled on the final page of "Ghosts in the Machine" (*X-Force*, vol. 1, #18, Jan. 1993, Nicieza/Capullo, Marvel Comics). Illyana Rasputin is first shown as having the virus in "Legacies" (*Uncanny X-Men*, vol. 1, #300, May 1993, Lobdell/Romita, Jr./Peterson, Marvel Comics).

52. For a very different study of the Legacy Virus, one that focuses on its role in soliciting a "biologically predetermined" understanding of sexuality, and the problems such an understanding might have "for the long-term acceptance of LGBTQ identity," see Christian Norman, "Mutating Metaphors: Addressing the Limits of Biological Narratives of Sexuality," *The Ages of the X-Men: Essays on the Children of the Atom in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (New York: McFarland, 2014): 165-177; quotes from 165.

53. See Jones, "Refusing the Name," an important study of the thematic refusal to name gay men's afflictions as AIDS in early 1990s gay literature, a refusal that highlighted the quotidian presence of AIDS in contemporary gay life.

effects of the virus on each PWA are unique. Moreover, both AIDS and Legacy are (at present) incurable, a point of significance that underscores the ethical concerns creators felt toward the representation of AIDS. That Legacy denotes AIDS is confirmed in an interview with Fabian Nicieza, one of the primary X-Men writers in the early 1990s, which is worth quoting at length:

We [the creative teams behind “X-Cutioner’s Song” and “Fatal Attractions”] specifically discussed ways to alienate mutants even further from mainstream superheroes, since by then the thematic tone of prejudice was cemented into the book’s structure. One thing the “new wave” of writers discussed was “why are mutants railed against but people are okay with the Fantastic Four or Thor?”...HIV/AIDS was a very prevalent topic at the time and absolutely as creators, having gone through our 20’s in the 80’s, we were well informed by the thematic underpinnings of prejudice against gays as a result of the virus outbreak.

AIDS, in the form of the Legacy Virus, was therefore a narratologically convenient but nonetheless heavily and explicitly politicized means for the X-Men’s creators to explain why mutants were different from, and feared by, non-mutant humans.⁵⁴

Nicieza and the other writers’ deployment of the Legacy Virus’s as a metaphor for AIDS is at times conflicted. To begin, Nicieza et al. intensified the discourse of AIDS that creates, in the words of Leo Bersani, “the peculiar exclusion of the principal sufferers,” focusing instead on “the heterosexual groups now [in 1987] minimally at risk, as if the high-risk groups were not part of the audience.”⁵⁵ This is evident in the story of the adolescent mutant Illyana Rasputin’s sickness and death in “Going Through the Motions” (*Uncanny X-Men*, vol. 1, #303, Aug. 1993,

54. Nicieza was interviewed via email by Joseph J. Darowski, quoted in Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor*, 116. The Legacy Virus remained incurable during the period under discussion, but a cure was effected in “The Cure” (*Uncanny X-Men*, vol. 1, #390, Mar. 2001, Lobdell/Larroca, Marvel Comics). It should also be noted that, as a biological weapon created for the purpose of exterminating a particular population, Legacy looks very much like the conspiracy theories surrounding HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s. One of the more pernicious of those theories held that HIV was the product of American military scientists who used the virus to cull the population of Africa; only accidentally, according to this theory, did it spread from Africa to the Caribbean, and to the United States. This rumor circulated in the Soviet bloc in the mid-1980s and found its way to British conservative newspapers; it continued to be repeated in newspapers worldwide throughout the late 1980s, as Sontag attests. Sontag’s discussion of the conspiracy theory is in “*Illness as Metaphor*” and “*AIDS and Its Metaphors*,” 140-141.

55. Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” 203.

Lobdell/Bennett, Marvel Comics), which bore on the cover, in bold descending letters adjacent to the image of two crying female characters, the hortative “If you read only *one* X-title this month--this issue *must* be it!” Illyana being a young female child, and more so a mutant whose powers have yet to manifest, and who therefore cannot be said to have chosen to be a mutant (or to have joined the X-Men), her “innocent” death refracts the fears of mainstream heterosexual America and doubly points to Ryan White’s three years prior. Illyana’s death is what Bersani describes as “displacement”: it centers the discourse on those least (or accidentally) affected and pushes the disproportionately affected PWA groups to the discursive, and thus social, margins.⁵⁶

The Legacy Virus raises unique questions about the ethics of the superhero in relation to AIDS, especially because the X-Men and its allied and enemy organizations can be read as representing the social formations of the AIDS crisis. The Acolytes, for example, are a militant group of mutants who fight alongside organizations such as the Mutant Liberation Front for the supremacy of mutants over humans.⁵⁷ Not an exact (or very positive) mimesis of the militant factions of AIDS activists (e.g. ACT UP) whose confrontational methods brought immediate attention to the plight of gay communities, the Acolytes stand in contradiction to X-Factor, a group of mutants employed by the U.S. government to handle mutant affairs. X-Factor metaphorizes AIDS activists, such as Treatment Action Group (TAG) and GMHC, who sought to effect change through bureaucratic means, rather than protest. The X-Men and X-Force (a band of twenty-something mutants), attempt to uphold the status quo by protecting mutants and non-mutants alike. The comics themselves produce the critique that the X-Men are “a group of mutants-- / --risking

56. The concept of “displacement” is developed throughout Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”

57 There is, of course, a resemblance between the name of the Mutant Liberation Front and of the Gay Liberation Front, the vanguard of the aptly named 1970s gay liberation movement. See John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

their lives to create a world where *everyone is treated equally*,” a moral stance described by a disaffected former X-Man as “the *stuff* of dreams.”⁵⁸ The popular fantasy of mutant superheroes fighting over mutanity’s place in society enacts the political fantasies of competing approaches to AIDS activism and demonstrates the superhero genre’s unique ability—compared to, say, television or film of the same era—to map the ethic complexities of the AIDS crisis. In the brilliantly crisis-prone, melodramatic four-color world of comics where imagination runs beyond logic, superheroes can answer or at least address difficult questions about who controls the narrative of the affected and how that narrative is told, about who gets treatment and government attention, and about how the public reacts to the affected. Superheroes can fight back; they never die (for long) and they always win.

The superhero’s relationship to the AIDS epidemic is dramatized throughout mainstream comics of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. *The New Guardians* and the X-Men’s Legacy Virus demonstrate that the superhero’s relationship to AIDS extends beyond the virus itself, implicating the superhero in the fight against the virus itself but also the fight for rights of those affected. Northstar’s 1992 coming out in the pages of *Alpha Flight*, for example, directly addresses whether superheroes have an ethical obligation to use their positions of power to effect positive change. Other comics throughout this period challenged the virus and the virus’s social effects alike. Superheroes even wrestled the epidemiological and social arms of the metaphorical AIDS supervillain in public service announcements published by DC Comics in association with the National AIDS Hotline, the GMHC, and the AIDS Project Los Angeles. The PSAs featured major and minor characters alike, among them the Green Lanterns, the Flash, the Teen Titans, members of the Justice League, and even Batman’s sidekick Robin, each of whom confronted damaging

58. Quotes from “Legacies” (*Uncanny X-Men*, vol. 1, #300, May 1993, Lobdell/Romita, Jr./Peterson, Marvel Comics).

misconceptions about HIV/AIDS transmission.⁵⁹ The superhero, it seemed, was the ideal figure to challenge the AIDS epidemic, as a role model for social action through education, and as a friend and defender of PWAs.

III “We’re Not Interested in Copping Out”: PWAs and the Superhero

Since the superhero’s early days on the bright, four-colored pages of cheap newspaper print, critics have derogated tights-and-spandex-clad superhumans as mere power fantasy, one that is both fascist and eugenicist in its origins.⁶⁰ But like any heroic figure, the super-subject has moral and ethical obligations to the communities it serves and protects, a generic distinction that comics historian Peter Coogan identifies as “a selfless, pro-social mission.”⁶¹ The extent of that mission speaks to prevailing social concerns about criminality, morality, and (social) justice; at a practical level, to the personal ethical obligations and political beliefs of creators, who extend the work of social justice in the real world onto the pages of their comics. Comic-book creators recognized that their fantastic medium could configure the superhero’s mission to fight (literally and

59. DC’s superhero AIDS PSAs appeared infrequently in various comics of their superhero line between 1992 and 1995. They also created a more candid PSA, *Death Talks about Life* (1994), a sixteen page comic written by British comics creator Neil Gaiman, in which his character Death from the *Sandman* comics speaks openly about HIV infection, the toll of AIDS, and the importance of condoms to stopping the spread of HIV. It was published by DC’s “mature” imprint Vertigo. Other companies, such as Archie Comics, published AIDS PSAs as well. Comics were recognized as a useful tool for the disbursement of HIV/AIDS education throughout the U.S. The People of Color Against AIDS Network, for example, hired comics creator and scholar Leonard Rivas to produce *AIDS News* in July 1988. For a study of comic books’ use in HIV/AIDS education see Matthew P. McAllister, “Comic Books and AIDS,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 26.2 (Fall 1992): 1-24. McAllister’s study is largely about independent comic books like Rivas’s *AIDS News* and about well-known newspaper strips (e.g. “Doonesbury”), though he does discuss DC’s PSAs. His study also contextualizes the long history of comic books’ use for social-educational purposes, the most famous examples of which were “...And Now, The Goblin!” (*The Amazing Spider-Man*, vol. 1, #96, May 1971, Lee/Kane, Marvel Comics) and “Snowbirds Don’t Fly” (*Green Lantern*, vol. 2, #85, Aug. 1971, O’Neil/Adams, DC Comics)—both published in 1971, both about the dangers of drug use and addiction.

60. The suggestion that the superhero is mere power fantasy—and that such a fantasy has no significance, that fantasy itself is childish and politically unmotivated—is critiqued by just about every comics scholar; see especially Coogan, *Superhero*; Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Morrison, *Supergods*; Fawaz, “Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!”; and Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*.

61. Coogan, *Superhero*, 30. Conversely, Coogan discerns that “someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic and therefore not a hero” (31).

metaphorically) the virus itself, but also to extend that mission to protecting and fighting on behalf of PWAs.

At the same time that *Alpha Flight* was fading from the market—unaffected by Northstar’s coming out, which was quickly subsumed into the dying series’s plot—Marvel writer Peter David brought to culmination an HIV/AIDS storyline three years in the making. “Lest Darkness Come” (*The Incredible Hulk*, vol. 1, #420, Aug. 1994, David/Frank, Marvel Comics) takes as its point of conflict the question of the superhero’s ethical duty to PWAs. This issue of *The Incredible Hulk* was bound in an all-black cover, the darkness of which is disrupted by the image of a dying man, Jim Wilson, holding the Hulk’s hand for comfort as he lies in a hospital bed. A lamp provides a cone of light that pierces the cover’s blackness, allowing viewers to glimpse the Hulk’s intimate moment. The cover also bore a red ribbon—symbol of The Red Ribbon Project by artist-activists Visual AIDS, founded in 1991—in the corner below the publication information. Just below the series’ title are the barely visible words “In the Shadow of AIDS,” hidden in an off-black grey. David plays self-consciously on a problem facing comics writers, one that *The New Guardians* letter column editor, Mark Waid, recognized in 1988 (more below). That is, whether or not superheroes, who often have access to science-fictional technologies or magical items with unbelievable capabilities, should be able to “cure” AIDS in their fictional worlds.⁶²

“Lest Darkness Come” details the last moments of two PWAs’ lives. The issue begins with Jim Wilson, the Hulk’s African American sidekick and close friend to Bruce Banner (the Hulk’s alter ego), being beaten by protesters picketing a PWA’s attendance at a local high school.⁶³ Jim,

62. On The Red Ribbon Project see Jesse Green, “The Year Of the Ribbon,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1992. For a discussion of Mark Waid and *The New Guardians* column see below. For a lengthy study of the Hulk’s character in the context of Marvel Comics’ publications, with an eye to their relationship to Cold War American political and cultural history, see Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

63. Most likely a reference to Ryan White, “AIDS schoolboy.”

who revealed his HIV diagnosis thirty-two issues prior in “Thicker than Water” (*The Incredible Hulk*, vol. 1, #388, Dec. 1991, David/Keown, Marvel Comics), is a heterosexual African-American AIDS activist who runs an AIDS clinic in Los Angeles. Hulk intervenes in the protest-turned-riot to save Jim, whom he whisks away to a high-tech base of operations. On his death bed, Jim asks Hulk for a transfusion of the gamma-irradiated blood that gives Hulk his superpowers and which Jim believes might cure HIV. The Hulk agrees to the transfusion, but instead uses non-gamma-irradiated blood because he fears turning Jim into a Hulk-like “monster.” But Jim uncovers Hulk’s subterfuge, and, understanding Hulk’s fears about using his own blood, Jim pretends that he is feeling stronger, that he is “gonna leap *out* of this bed in just a couple minutes. / Just gotta rest up a bit....” His last breath a performance, Jim dies.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Hulk’s wife, Betty, an emergency hotline attendant, is about to leave work when a suicidal, HIV-positive man named Chet calls. On the last page of the issue, as Betty fitfully tries to encourage him to live, the reader watches Chet drive his car onto a train track, as the light of a train approaches and the panels fade to the black anonymity of his death. These two intertwining stories are, much like the deployment of the Legacy Virus’s allegorical meaning, conflicted in their presentation of AIDS.

Jim’s desire for a miracle cure and his hope that the superpowered Hulk could deliver one signifies the utopian fantasy of a quick end to the AIDS epidemic, a hope heightened and flattened in the wake of various experimental drugs’ failure to provide successful long-term treatment. Jim’s and Chet’s passings are described by death and disability studies and comics studies scholar José Alaniz as “existential death,” a unique brand of comic-book expiry that is meaningless in the schema of the superhero genre. Like all comic-book deaths, such deaths burden the psyche of the

64. Hulk’s fear about using his blood for Jim’s transfusion is not unfounded; in “The She-Hulk Lives” (*Savage She-Hulk*, vol. 1, #1, Feb. 1980, Lee/Buscema, Marvel Comics) Bruce Banner (aka the Hulk) gives his dying cousin Jennifer Walters a transfusion, and turns her into the unimaginatively named She-Hulk.

hero but differ from “heroic deaths” that save people or accomplish an end—deaths that “mean” something. Jim’s death burdens Hulk, even though it was the Hulk who made the ethical choice not to cure his friend. Hulk’s quiet, despairing flight from Jim’s deathbed resounds with Betty’s presumed response to Chet’s suicide. Together, the deaths of Jim and Chet—one from AIDS-related complications, the other because he is afraid of the social consequences of living with HIV—are, like other existential deaths examined by Alaniz, “an emotionally powerful and authentic means to relate the high-risk stakes of superhero experience in a more realistic fashion.”⁶⁵ By emphasizing the effect of AIDS-related deaths on the superhero, or in the case of Betty Banner, the superhero’s wife, “Lest Darkness Come” reinscribes the discourse of displacement witnessed in other comics.

It might be possible to rescue the superhero from the dubious position it seems to hold in relation to its ethical responsibility to AIDS. For while Hulk’s refusal to provide a cure for Jim, and the inability of the New Guardians to muster their magical and technological prowess to treat HIV, are surely ethically problematic, the characters’ failures to “solve” AIDS in their fictional worlds are acts of comic-book activism. As popular fantasies, these comics “suture together” the social and political realities of AIDS activism by holding out the possibility of a “cure” for AIDS. Superheroes, especially ones with alien technologies and magical powers, should be able to cure diseases—that, after all, is one of the functions of fantasy: to project the impossible into the real. But as a “popular” fantasy that builds on social realities, the superhero genre cannot solve problems that will, for its audience, persist beyond the pages of the comic and into the quotidian. The Hulk’s choice not to provide a cure to Jim is as much an ethical decision as Peter David’s choice to write

65. Quotes from José Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*, 194, 196. Jim’s death is discussed in brief on 195-196, though Alaniz does not address Hulk’s decision and he ignores Chet’s disturbing death—arguably a more “meaningless” and therefore more “existential” one.

that decision into the comic. It is a decision recognized and faced by creators since 1988. In response to a letter querying whether Extraño could cure his teammates of AIDS, for example, the editor of *The New Guardians* letter column Mark Waid responded

no, Extrano [*sic.*] could not magically cure his teammates...What a crummy insult that would be to all the real-life AIDS victims out there—waving a magic wand and curing one of the greatest tragedies of current times. How comic-booky. AIDS is a touchy issue; we're not interested in copping out, and we think you realize that.

That Waid identifies a magical AIDS cure as the stuff of comics points not to the actual content of *The New Guardians* or any other comic engaged in the AIDS discourse, but rather to the prevailing public opinion that superhero comics are fantasy, fun, and gimmicks—the very opinion that Fawaz's politicizing conceptualization of comics as popular fantasy counters.⁶⁶ It may be that preventing a cure provides the practical benefit of drawing out the drama of a story, of using AIDS as a tragically cliché character-building device, and of allowing a more extensive critique of real-world events. But comic books' failure to cure AIDS reflected their creators' genuine concern for the social effect of their stories. They took seriously the ability of comics to enter into the discursive realm of the AIDS crisis, to be mimetic rather than farcical. By dwelling on the emotion provoked by Jet's or Illyana's or Jim's deaths, comic-book creators painfully demonstrated that a cure did not exist. Cures are fantasies, and unadulterated fantasy in this instance was for the creators as much as the superheroes, unethical.

Dedication to the emotional content of the AIDS crisis is further demonstrated in the letter column of *The Incredible Hulk* #420, which featured a unique collection of letters written by comics-industry insiders about HIV/AIDS in their lives. The letter writers included Marvel editors (Kelly Corvese), writers (Don DeBrandt, Gary Guzzo, Michael Kraiger, Jeph Loeb, Mindy

66. Mark Waid's quote from letter column appears in "By the Rockets Red Glare" (*The New Guardians*, vol. 1, #5, Winter 1988, Bates/Staton, DC Comics) [*sic.*, play on the name of the issue's villains, the Rocket Reds].

Newell, Barbara Slate), and artists (Chris Cooper, Joe Rubinstein, Tom Tenney), a number of whom told stories of gay PWAs—themselves, friends, family, neighbors, lovers. The letters ranged from brief personal stories to elegies, many of them stating their hope that, through comics about HIV/AIDS, they might save a life or change homophobic attitudes (“a *human* problem, not a *homo* problem”). The letter column pooled the emotional energies of creators to show readers that even if AIDS finds its way into comics only occasionally, the industry’s culture workers cope with it daily. Not surprisingly, the *Hulk* column was a one-time affair; nothing like it appeared before or again in the mainstream. But it was the first place in mainstream comics where readers could come to know the effect AIDS was having in the lives of comics creators. The column reflected earlier, frank discussion of the epidemic in independent comics anthologies such as *A.A.R.G.H. (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia)* and *Strip AIDS USA*. It also crystalized the discourse about AIDS and homosexuality that was present in a small body of mainstream comics, their letter columns, and occasionally in comic-book advertisements, such as DC’s PSAs.⁶⁷

Whereas “Lest Darkness Come” addressed the relationship of the superhero to individuals in his life who suffer from AIDS, and in so doing raised ethical dilemmas about the superhero’s ability to protect PWAs from the ravages of the epidemic as well as questioned creators’ life experiences and reasons for writing about AIDS, other comics broadened the superhero’s horizon to explore the societal ramifications of AIDS, with special emphasis on its impact in gay men’s lives. “Hidden in View” (*Nomad*, vol. 2, #12-15, Apr.-Jul. 1993, Nicieza/Olliffe/Mays, Marvel Comics), for example, was a four-issue story arc in the somewhat obscure series *Nomad*, a comic about the eponymous vigilante Jack Monroe, former sidekick to Captain America turned

67. Alan Moore, ed., *A.A.R.G.H. (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia)* (Mad Love, 1988); Trina Robbins, Bill Sienkiewicz, Robert Triptow, eds., *Strip AIDS USA: A Collection of Cartoon Art to Benefit People With AIDS* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1988).

disgruntled “bleeding heart liberal,” who travels the U.S. with his toddler daughter. Together, with the visual help of Nomad’s red mullet, they fight for the rights of the poor and the disadvantaged. Writer Nicieza (of X-Men fame) utilized *Nomad* as a bullhorn for sensitive political issues, among them American Indian land rights, racial tension in Los Angeles, drug use and poverty, the military-industrial complex, HIV/AIDS, and homophobia. Although its underlying premise was the conflict between Nomad and the metamorphic supervillain Hate-Monger, “Hidden in View” explores different aspects of gay life in the “epidemic time” of AIDS.

In the first, “But Words Will Never Hurt Me” (*Nomad*, vol. 2, #12, Apr. 1993, Nicieza/Olliffe, Marvel Comics), Nomad takes to the defense of an AIDS clinic that is beseeched by the Clean Community Commandos (CCC), a group of homophobes who seek to rid Ft. Worth, TX, of “queers.” The CCC are galvanized to action in nightly attack against the clinic and its patients by a radio shock jock, the “Roar,” who believes that gay men are responsible for the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, he believes that because gay men sometimes keep their sexuality private (“closeted”) they are trying to subvert the United States and its moral integrity, “to bring this country *down*.” The Roar stands here as an example of a trope common in the comic-book discourse about AIDS: the use of homophobia to galvanize the hero—and, by consequence, the reader—to the defense of gay men, and by association, PWAs. Homophobia is glimpsed wherever AIDS appears in comics: anti-gay protestors are seen at the AIDS clinic protests in “The New Guardians” (*The New Guardians*, vol. 1, #3) and are the cause of the riot at the beginning of “Lest Darkness Comes.” Homophobia is a predominant theme in other narratives, such as the two-part story arc “Gauntlet” (*Green Arrow*, vol. 2, #5-6, Jun.-Jul. 1988, Grell/Hannigan, DC Comics), in which the Green Arrow intervenes in a “gay bash wave” that hits Seattle at the behest of a gang leader who contracted AIDS in prison, who murders gay men in a campaign of existential revenge.

Whereas Green Arrow is interested in immediate, individual justice—finding and beating the gay-bashers, threatening them with retaliation from “the gay activist alliance”—Nomad explores the social depth of homophobia in the United States.

Nomad goes undercover as a journalist for *Rolling Stone* to interview the Roar, whom he later discovers is the leader of the CCC.⁶⁸ The connection to *Rolling Stone* is crucial, since it identifies that magazine’s prominence in the popular discourse about AIDS, which it entered into very early in the history of the epidemic, in 1985, with David Black’s two-part feature “The Plague Years,” expanded and released in a book of the same name the following year.⁶⁹ Black’s writing emphasized the disproportionately negative effects of AIDS on gay men’s political successes from decades prior. That Nomad poses as a *Rolling Stone* journalist also positions the series as one of Marvel’s “coolest” series, and simultaneously demonstrates that very little has changed in the eight years since Black’s “The Plague Years.” To frame his approach to the Roar, Nomad interviews people all across Ft. Worth. The city-roaming interviews are illustrated panel by panel, each of which is overlaid across two pages with a portion of a monologue by Nomad:

I listen to people talk. / -- To those who think you can get it from *kissing* your girlfriend-- whether she has HIV or *not*. / I hear their anger, their hare-brained reasoning-- / --their rationalizations, their fears, their blindness, their *ignorance*--and I realize-- / it’s a *stupidity* thing-- /.../ There is so much ignorance about the *HIV* virus and the *AIDS* disease-- / --about who gets it, how and why. / From people who think *touching* a gay man will do it-- / --it’s not a *Texas* thing. It’s a people thing. And in *this* country, more and more every day, if it’s a *people* thing-- /.../ If I’m not part of the *solution*, I must be part of the *problem*.

68. Or, at the very least, the Roar is coordinating with them to get more listeners and stir up controversy; the relationship is left ambiguous.

69. David Black, “The Plague Years, Part One,” *Rolling Stone*, 444 (28 March 1985); David Black, “The Plague Years, Part Two,” *Rolling Stone*, 446 (25 April 1985); David Black, *The Plague Years: A Chronicle of AIDS, the Epidemic of Our Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

Writer Nicieza parses suspected reasons for homophobia among the general population, using Ft. Worth as a temperature gauge for the rest of the nation.⁷⁰

Nicieza's recognition that contemporary U.S. homophobia is exacerbated by AIDS is an important one. Homophobic hate crimes skyrocketed in the late 1980s and throughout the early 1990s, and though statistics vary nationwide depending on the reporting institution, the numbers are telling. The National Gay & Lesbian Taskforce, for example, cited a 244 percent increase in homophobic episodes reported per year between 1985 and 1989; the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project noted a 405 percent increase in local anti-gay incidents; and the FBI reported a 127 percent national increase in violent homophobic crimes between 1988 and 1993. As a cultural phenomenon, the AIDS crisis was constituted of competing political claims that simultaneously rendered gay bodies as victim and threat, dying minority and deviant aggressor.⁷¹

Nicieza turns his attention in the following issue, "If It Weren't For Love" (*Nomad*, vol. 2, #13, May 1993, Nicieza/Olliffe, Marvel Comics), to government inaction in the face of the AIDS epidemic. After fleeing Ft. Worth for fear that he would be charged with assaulting the shock jock, Nomad moves thirty miles east to Dallas, where a serial criminal nicknamed "The Needle" is infecting her sexual partners with HIV using an HIV-laced serum injected via needle. The comic shows concerned citizens protesting in the streets, but rather than protesting violently against gay men, these protestors turn their attention to the cops' lack of success apprehending the criminal. The protesters are led by Nomad's girlfriend, Horseshoe, who rallies the crowd around her calls

70. I have used bold italics font to represent the extra emphasis given the word "stupidity" in the comic, which is rendered in large, bold, red lettering—an unusual font for comics, but one that is often used by letterer Chris Eliopoulos throughout the *Nomad* series.

71. NGLT and NYCGLAVP statistics cited in Kevin T. Berrill, "Anti-Gay Violence and Victimization in the United States: An Overview," *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence against Lesbians and Gay Men*, eds. Gregory M. Herek and Kevin T. Berrill (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1992), 19-45, see 36-37; FBI statistics from Walters, *All the Rage*, 9.

for justice: “The cops want this woman to keep on killing don’t they? / ‘Course they do--helps them get rid of the ‘*social deviants*’! / Makes their jobs *easier*, don’t it? Well it’s time to tell the fascist system we won’t lie back an’ take it!” Horseshoe’s call to action is mimetic of the anti-fascist tone that cultural historian Christopher Vials suggests characterized AIDS activists’ configurations of Reagan and his administration as perpetuating a genocide of gay men and drug users—the “social deviants” Horseshoe refers to.⁷² In a twist that is, unlike most comic-book plot twists, actually shocking, Nomad discovers by issue’s end that Horseshoe is The Needle. (And, like Major Maple Leaf in *Alpha Flight* #106, she tries to kill a child, Nomad’s daughter) Formerly a nurse, she gave up her job when she accidentally infected a “poor little girl” with HIV during a blood transfusion. Since then, she made it her mission to infect people who “deserve it,” who “need to live with the *guilt* of what they do” to other people, to the world. In the end, Horseshoe figuratively takes her own life, injecting herself with the last of her serum.

Nicieza takes his story further when, in the subsequent issue, “From the Outside Looking In” (*Nomad*, vol. 2, #14, Jun. 1993, Nicieza/Mays, Marvel Comics), he turns to the problematic of “outing” and the implications of being out and gay in the era of AIDS. “From the Outside Looking In” is a response to the shock jock’s fear mongering in *Nomad* #12 when he declares the closet as an inherent threat to the public, a hiding place for the AIDS epidemic to fester before assailing heterosexual America. The issue follows Nomad’s efforts to stop a gay tabloid, *Out and About*, from “outing” a senator’s son. The fictional magazine was likely inspired by *OutWeek*, a well-known but short-lived gay publication famous for Michelangelo Signorile’s “GossipWeek” column, which regularly outed closeted public figures. Nomad is hired to stop the outing by the

72. Christopher Vials, *Haunted by Hitler: Liberals, the Left, and the Fight against Fascism in the United States* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), esp. the chapter “Queer Antifascism: Pink Triangle Politics and the Christian Right,” 194-232.

outee's father, a U.S. senator who stands to lose a military contract on account of his son's identity.⁷³ The question of the ethics of outing is directly related to the AIDS crisis both in the *Nomad* storyline and in comics more generally. Consider, for example, that Northstar decides to out himself only after he is accused of being complicit with government and public inaction regarding AIDS's effect in the gay community. While both Scott Lobdell of *Alpha Flight* and *Nomad*'s Nicieza identify the act of outing as a loss of the outee's autonomy over his public identity, and therefore label the act homophobic, both writers contend through their characters the necessity for (gay) public voices to represent the communities most affected by AIDS.⁷⁴ The "Hidden in View" storyline concludes in "Love, Hate, and Everything In Between" (*Nomad*, vol. 2, #15, Jul. 1993, Nicieza/Olliffe, Marvel Comics), wherein it is revealed that all of the homophobic incidents were manipulated into being by Hate-Monger, a shapeshifting villain with an unexplained grudge against Nomad.

Written by the same scripter of the X-Men storylines about the Legacy Virus, "Hidden in View" is a unique engagement with the politics of the AIDS crisis, since over the course of three very different issues, Nicieza addresses some of the most important ethical questions raised by the epidemic. Nomad is a streetwise vigilante whose stories appear to be more a part of the crime or detective genre than of the superhero, despite the fact that he is, like Captain America, a superpowered former soldier. Nomad is figured as homophobia's enemy on the street, the mouth and muscle of those educated to the knowledge that exonerates gay men from insipid constructions of their moral and sexual depravity. Attuned to the sources of public discourse, Nicieza writes the

73. *OutWeek* played a crucial role in the history of gay serial publications; see "Open Closets, Closed Doors," *Time*, 8 July 1991 for a discussion of *OutWeek*'s legacy after its closing. *Out and About*, the name of the fictional magazine in *Nomad* #14, is also the name of a gay travel newsletter; see Walters, *All the Rage*, 277. For a discussion of Michelangelo Signorile in the context of the gay nineties and his theorizing gay visibility in relation to the closet see Walters, *All the Rage*, 28-29.

74. Compare the problem of being "outed" as gay, and of trying to protect one's sexual identity, to the generic fret over the public discovering a superhero's secret identity.

media and public figures as much more important than the superhero in swaying public opinion. While Nomad takes a side, he is not considered a bastion of moral authority as might be expected—social movements do not rally around Nomad, but are joined by him. In this way Nicieza asserts that massive, nationwide action is required to fight the epidemic proportion of AIDS—that AIDS, like poverty, is a social crisis too big for the superhero to fight alone. After all, as the X-Men, New Guardians, and the Hulk could attest, superheroes and their sidekicks die from AIDS-related causes, too.

IV “New Blood”: Comic Books in the Post-AIDS Era

After 1994 AIDS dropped out of creators’ comics work, even though homosexuality continued to be written into comic-book storylines and was perceptibly heightened in fictional comic-book universes in the 2000s. This shift to silence came at a curious moment, both in the history of comics and that of AIDS. Comic-book companies—and by necessity the creators whose paychecks depended on them—pushed toward more generically normative narratives, the comic-book equivalents of “blockbusters” that might, like *X-Men* #1 (vol. 2, Oct. 1991), sell in the millions. This meant making more comics more quickly, comics that hit the broadest common appeal by exposing the superhero to greater heights of hypermasculine excess and cutting down on heavily political content. At the same time, AIDS reached its highest number of deaths and caseloads in the mid-1990s, peaking in 1995 with just over 49,000 deaths in the U.S. alone, more than double the annual toll in 1988.⁷⁵ Death tolls declined significantly in 1997 with the advent of antiretroviral (ARV) treatments, marking what Gill-Peterson describes as “a mutation in the temporality of HIV/AIDS...from epidemic to endemic time.”⁷⁶ This is to say that the shift to the

75. AIDS death statistics cited in “Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic.”

76. Gill-Peterson, “Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS,” 279.

post-AIDS era came early for comics and that the AIDS discourse that lasted between 1988 and 1994 had a significant impact on the comics immediately postdating that shift.

The post-AIDS moment of gay visibility began nearly instantaneously. Milestone Comics—a subsidiary of Milestone Media that published as an imprint of DC Comics, and that was devoted to characters and readers of color—for example, published a multi-issue story arc, “What Are Little Boys Made Of?” (*Static*, vol. 1, #16-20, Oct. 1994-Feb. 1995, Washington III/Velez, Jr./Wilfred), about homophobia and gay rights in one of its hippest comics, *Static*. The series itself was unprecedented, about a black teenage superhero, Virgil Ovid Hawkins (aka Static), who gains the power to control electromagnetism during a gang war that ends when police release a mutagenic tear gas, turning all who come into contact with it into superpowered “metahumans.”⁷⁷ At the heart of “What Are Little Boys Made Of?” is Virgil’s discovery that his friend Rick is gay, which he learns when, as Static, he rescues Rick from gay-bashers. Rick’s outing causes him to lose his friends, who are worried everyone at school will think they are gay, too. Virgil is particularly adamant about eschewing Rick: “Everybody’s lookin’ at us, mumblin’ about us--why couldn’t you just keep it to yourself?” But by the fourth issue, “Between a Rick and a Hard Place”

77. *Static* was published between 1993 and 1997 by Milestone Comics, a company originally founded by four black artists and writers—Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Michael Davis, Derek T. Dingle—for the purpose of telling stories predominantly about superheroes of color. Among their taglines they claimed to be starting “A Revolution in Comics”; they also sampled the title of the 1971 Gil Scott-Heron song, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” in their advertisements, as well as quipping that their comics provide “More than Just the Color.” Critically, Jeffrey A. Brown has argued that Milestone and their eight-plus series provided an answer to the lack of visibility of people of color in American superhero comics. Although they began as a separate company, Milestone Media struck an immediate deal with DC Comics to publish as an imprint of DC. Using DC’s market position as one of the two leading mainstream companies, Milestone was made a significant impact on the comics industry in the mid-1990s. See Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000) for a history of Milestone Comics. Shockingly, in his *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), Adilifu Nama discusses Milestone Comics but briefly, see esp. 93-96. It is prudent to note that Ivan Velez, Jr., writer on several of the “What Are Little Boys Made Of?” issues, is a gay Latino comics creator, and that much of his acclaimed work is independent gay comics. See his website, *Planet Bronx*, www.planetbronx.com, for more information about his works and biography. As a result of Velez’s importance to the company’s writing projects, Milestone Comics touched on queer themes more than once; see the Appendix below for Milestone’s contributions to queer visibility.

(*Static*, vol. 1, #19, Jan. 1995, Velez, Jr./Wilfred, Milestone Comics), much to the credit of his girlfriend, Virgil comes to understand how his actions have negatively impacted Rick, and after a brief clash with a supremacist group, Virgil reconciles with Rick and his friends. Crucially, AIDS is not present.

Gay visibility perceptively lessened in comics of the mid- and late 1990s. Few sustained, multi-issue storylines dealt with gay characters as they had in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, gay visibility was reduced to single-issue events, and while gay characters who had outed themselves or been outed previously continued to appear in the comics of the late 1990s, their sexuality remained largely unimportant to the stories being told—with the exception of Apollo and Midnighter, gay married superheroes in Warren Ellis’s *Stormwatch* (introduced in vol. 2, #4, Feb. 1998, Ellis/Hitch, Image Comics). But AIDS was no longer a thematic of comic-book discourse. Its virtual disappearance from superhero comic books after 1994, however, did not mean that AIDS ceased to be important in the lives of comic-book creators. In the letter column of “Requiem,” the final installment in the short-lived series *Tempest* (vol. 1, #4, Feb. 1997, Jimenez, DC Comics), writer and artist Phil Jimenez came out to readers. In doing so, he disclosed his long-term relationship with noted DC writer/artist Neal Pozner, who died in 1994 from AIDS-related complications, writing, “[Pozner] was the first man I ever asked out on a date; he was my first boyfriend; he was the first person I’d ever watched live with and die from complications from AIDS.” Jimenez’s recollection of Pozner is sincere and candid, reminiscent of the stories told in the letter column of “Lest Darkness Come” (*The Incredible Hulk*, vol. 1, #420).⁷⁸

78. Similar to Jimenez, lauded comics artist P. Craig Russell outed himself, though he did so in an interview with *The Comics Journal*, 147 (December 1991): 44-73. Another example of a comic published during this period that discussed AIDS is gay artist and ACT UP activist David Wojnarowicz’s autobiographical graphic novel *7 Miles A Second*, originally published in 1996 by Vertigo, DC Comics’ imprint for non-mainstream comics. *7 Miles A Second* went largely unnoticed by comics readers in 1996, despite being the second-best selling graphic novel the month of its debut (“March 1996 Comic Book Sales Rankings,” *Comichron: The Comics Chronicles*, <http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/1996/1996-03Diamond.html>), due perhaps to its intensely graphic

After nearly a decade of silence on the topic of AIDS a breakout new creator at DC, Judd Winick, used his position as writer of *Green Arrow* in the early 2000s to remind readers that HIV/AIDS still affected the lives of millions. Judd Winick's mainstream comics success was prefaced by his tenure on the MTV reality show *The Real World III: San Francisco* (1994). The show featured Winick, a cartoonist, alongside Pedro Zamora and a cast of six others, who shared a house on Russian Hill in San Francisco for six months.⁷⁹ Zamora brought the experiences of life with AIDS to millions of viewers, who watched as Zamora's castmates—including a conservative woman who initially feared living with Zamora—became close friends with him, as they advocated for greater awareness of HIV/AIDS alongside him, and as they worried over his deteriorating health. Episodes of *The Real World III: San Francisco* featured Zamora giving HIV/AIDS education lectures and detailed Zamora's blossoming relationship with Sean Sasser, whose marriage to Zamora aired during the nineteenth episode in October 1994. Through the show Winick became intimate friends with Zamora, and when Zamora was too sick to continue an AIDS education tour, Winick took over for him and continued giving HIV/AIDS education lectures for three years.

In 2000 Winick published an Eisner award-nominated autobiographical graphic novel, *Pedro and Me*, which wove together his and Zamora's life stories.⁸⁰ Winick's success as a graphic novelist propelled him into DC Comics' spotlight, and by the summer of the same year Winick was writing *Green Lantern*, which opened the door for more than a decade of writing at DC. In 2002 Winick wrote "Hate Crimes" (*Green Lantern*, vol. 3, #155-156, Dec. 2002-Jan. 2003,

and sexual content, appearing in levels uncommon in most non-mainstream comics but entirely symptomatic of Wojnarowicz's blissfully confrontational aesthetic.

79. Interestingly, Winick beat out novelist Dave Eggers for a position on *The Real World III: San Francisco*, which Eggers wrote about at some length in his memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 209-219. In episode two, "Love Stinks" (New York: MTV, 23 June 1994), Winick even interviews at Eggers's magazine, *Might*, as a potential publisher for his comics.

80. Judd Winick, *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).

Winick/Eaglesham, DC Comics), a two-issue storyline about the homophobic bashing of the intergalactic superhero Green Lantern's (i.e. Kyle Rayner's) friend and assistant, Terry, and the Green Lantern's uncharacteristically violent reaction, which leaves the three gay-bashers hospitalized. But much like *Static's* "What Are Little Boys Made Of" story arc, "Hate Crimes" is not about HIV/AIDS. Rather it is an attempt by Winick to bring awareness to quotidian hate crimes and to start a discussion about the continued existence of homophobia in post-gay liberation America.⁸¹ Significantly, "Hate Crimes" was developed through an unprecedented coalition between the comic-book industry and a gay rights organization—its narrative based on personal experiences related to Winick by bisexual comic-book editor Bob Schreck and written in consultation with Cathy Renna of GLAAD.⁸²

In response to "Hate Crimes" *Out* magazine hailed Winick as a "superhero to gays and lesbians."⁸³ Two years later Winick channeled his experiences as an HIV/AIDS educator into "New Blood" (*Green Arrow*, vol. 3, #40-45, Sep. 2004-Feb. 2005, Winick/Hester, DC Comics). In this five-issue story arc Winick reveals that Green Arrow's (Oliver Queen's) fan-beloved ward, Mia "Speedy" Dearden, is HIV-positive.⁸⁴ "New Blood" is devoted to Mia's coming to terms with

81. Compare the idea of a "post-liberation gay America" this to the contemporaneous post-feminist belief that feminism has run its course, won its battles, and rendered the "sexes" equal, or the post-racial ideology that Barack Obama's election to the office of President signals the immediate achievement of racial equality. See Kristin J. Anderson, *Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), a recent study of post-feminism's cooptation by anti-feminists, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), the seminal text in the study of post-racial formations in the U.S.

82. On the development and writing of "Hate Crimes" see Valerie Palmer-Mehta and Kellie Hay, "A Superhero for Gays?: Gay Masculinity and *Green Lantern*," *The Journal of American Culture*, 28.4 (December 2005): 390-404, 390. Palmer-Mehta and Hay's study provides a remarkable amount of information about the storyline's influences, writing, and unpublished fan responses. Significantly, a letter from Cathy Renna, also then representing GLAAD, appeared in the letter column responses to "The Walking Wounded," published in *Alpha Flight* #110 ("Bare Bones," vol. 1, Jul. 1992, Furman/Broderick, Marvel Comics).

83. Quote from *Out* magazine in Palmer-Mehta and Hay, "A Superhero for Gays?" 390.

84. For fans, Mia's nickname, "Speedy," marks her as the contemporary successor to Oliver Queen/Green Arrow's first sidekick and ward, Roy Harper, who also went by "Speedy." That Mia's diagnosis is a result of her former (forced) drug addiction is a nod to the August 1971 comic "Snowbirds Don't Fly" (*Green Lantern*, vol. 1, #85, O'Neil/Adams, DC Comics), wherein it is discovered that Speedy is a heroin addict. The iconic Neal Adams

her diagnosis, which is the result of her forced prostitution and former drug addiction—a life from which Green Arrow rescued her. The “New Blood” narrative is loosely inspired by Zamora’s life, so much so that, in the arc’s final issue—the name of which, “Coming Out,” indicates a clearly drawn relationship between the stigma of being gay and the stigma of being HIV-positive—Mia gives a speech to her high school about “living with H.I.V.”⁸⁵ In order to demonstrate that one can, indeed, “live” with HIV/AIDS, the storyline concludes with Oliver Queen agreeing to let Mia become his crime-fighting sidekick. While “New Blood” received none of the critical attention that “Hate Crimes” did, Winick’s serious engagement with HIV highlighted and challenged the erasure of HIV/AIDS in superhero comic books. Moreover, like earlier attempts to narrate the lives of PWAs or the public life of the AIDS epidemic, driven as they were by personal desires to use comics to advocate for gay men’s and PWAs’ rights, Winick’s comics lay bare his struggle to understand his best friend’s AIDS-related death and his desire to recognize the continuing struggle for gay social justice and HIV/AIDS education.

Winick’s comics reflected on one of the most crucial moments in the history of gay visibility in American popular culture, a brief six years between 1988 and 1994 that saw an unprecedented rise of gay men’s visibility in American comic books. The same period that achieved the repeal of the CCA’s half-century-long ban on the representation of homosexuality (1989) also effected a sincere, prolonged, and politically motivated engagement with the AIDS crisis. In works both obscure and critically acclaimed, mainstream comic-book creators addressed the paucity of government response to the AIDS epidemic and simultaneously advocated

cover showed a stunned Oliver Queen exclaiming “My ward is a *junkie!*” as Speedy hunches over before him, gripping his upper arm—needles, vials, and a cooking spoon splayed out on the table next to him.

85. Mia’s speech is adapted from Zamora’s many lectures, which Winick learned nearly word-for-word when he took over Zamora’s lecture tour in 1994. One of these lectures, which is also given in an episode of *The Real World*, is recounted in *Pedro and Me*, 96-102.

awareness of the disproportionate effects of AIDS in the gay community. Creators also recognized the connection between rising homophobia rates and the social construction of AIDS as a “gay disease” and a threat to the American body politic. Through the figure of the superhero comic-book creators fought AIDS. They did so through the fantastical affordances of the superhero genre, wherein their four-color superhumans challenged AIDS at the epidemiological and social levels. In the physical form of the comic book and its popularly consumed narratives creators also provided HIV/AIDS education. They directed reader attention to the social, cultural, and political problematics of the epidemic, but also gave practical information about how the virus spread. Comic books’ discursive commitment to the AIDS crisis between 1988 and 1994 provided much-needed awareness of HIV/AIDS alongside serious critiques of public and governmental inaction. Uniting the generic conventions of the superhero with the energies and anger of AIDS activists and the affected, comic-book creators carved out their own discourse within the larger cultural sphere of the AIDS crisis. In the company of superheroes, PWAs gained advocates and visibility largely denied in other popular narratives of the AIDS era.

Appendix: A Timeline of LGBT Visibility in Comics

This timeline included mainstream comic books with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters, as well as those comics referenced in the text above. The timeline begins after the creation of the 1954 Comics Code Authority and continues half a century to 2004. The timeline takes the form of a bibliography (see the Bibliography below for an explanation of my citation style). The timeline was compiled over the course of my research in consultation with the “Comics Timeline” created by The Queer Comics Historian and with Jenny North’s *Transgender Graphics and Fiction Archive*. Because thousands of comics are published every year, there may very well be many more comics that purposefully included (covert) queer characters or that are ambiguous enough to suggest queer readings. This timeline should therefore be understood as merely representative of a history of queer visibility. If a queer character reoccurs in a series, I list only the initial issue of that character’s “outing,” except where different creative teams (or even the same creative team) have used a character’s sexuality for narrative-specific purposes. Following The Queer Comics Historian’s lead, up to the year 1989 I have indicated at the end of each citation whether or not a comic was given Comics Code Authority approval. This timeline does not include underground comix or alternative and independent comics, for which the history of queer visibility looks very different. (Note that my definition of mainstream, discussed above in Section I, differs from The Queer Comics Historian’s, in that his definition largely connotes “non-underground,” thereby creating a broader and much less useful “catch-all” categorization. Our timelines are therefore rather different in scope.) The timeline represents “positive” treatments of queer characters as well as “negative” examples and those that are more complicated in their portrayal. More often than not, the following comics deal but fleetingly with queer characters; sustained development of queer identities and narratives is rare.

1950s

Ditko, Steve (w/a). “The Man Who Stepped Out From A Cloud.” *Out of This World*, vol. 1, #5 (September 1957), Charlton Comics. CCA approved.

1960s

Binder, Otto (w) and John Sikela (a). “Claire Kent, Alias Super-Sister.” *Superboy*, vol. 1, #78 (January 1960), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Broome, John (w) and Carmine Infantino (a). “Beware the Atomic Grenade!” *Flash*, vol. 1, #122 (August 1961), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Dorfman, Leo (w) and Curt Swan (a). “Leslie Lowe, Girl Reporter!” *Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen*, vol. 1, #67 (March 1963), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Dorfman, Leo (w) and John Forte (a). “Jimmy Olsen’s Female Fan!” *Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen*, vol. 1, #84 (April 1965), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Binder, Otto (w) and Curt Swan (a). "Miss Jimmy Olsen." *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen*, vol. 1, #95 (September 1966), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Binder, Otto (w) and Jim Mooney (a). "Supergirl's Secret Marriage!" *Action Comics*, vol. 1, #357 (December 1967), DC Comics. CCA approved.

1970s

Dorfman, Leo (w) and Kurt Schaffenberger (a). "They Day They Unmasked Mr. Action." *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen*, vol. 1, #159 (August 1973), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Glanzman, Sam J. (w/a). "Toro." *Our Fighting Forces*, vol. 1, #148 (May 1974), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Gerber, Steve (w) and Carmine Infantino (a). "If You Knew SOOFL..." *Howard the Duck*, vol. 1, #21 (February 1978), Marvel Comics. CCA approved.

1980s

Pasko, Martin (w) and Curt Swan (a). "The Turnabout Trap!" *Superman*, vol. 1, #349 (July 1980), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Shooter, Jim (w) and John Buscema (a). "A Very Personal Hell." *Hulk!*, vol. 1, #23 (October 1980), Marvel Magazines. Magazines are not submitted to CCA.

Mantlo, Bill (w) and Mike Vosburg (a). "Saturn's Secret..." *Bizarre Adventures*, vol. 1, #30 (February 1982), Marvel Magazines. Not CCA approved.

DeMatteis, J.M. (w) and Mike Zeck (a). "Someone Who Cares." *Captain America*, vol. 1, #270 (June 1982), Marvel Comics. CCA approved.

Byrne, John (w/a). "Into the Negative Zone!" *Fantastic Four*, vol. 1, #251 (February 1983), Marvel Comics. CCA approved.

Barr, Mike W. (w) and Brian Bolland (a). "Knight Quest." *Camelot 3000*, vol. 1, #3 (February 1983), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Wolfman, Marv (w) and Keith Pollard (a). "Witnesses." *Vigilante*, vol. 1, #5 (April 1984), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Gillis, Peter B. (w) and Don Perlin (a). "Manslaughter!" *The Defenders*, vol. 1, #134 (August 1984), Marvel Comics. CCA approved.

——— "Bodies and Soul!" *The Defenders*, vol. 1, #136 (October 1984), Marvel Comics. Not CCA approved.

Claremont, Chris (w) and John Bolton (a). *The Black Dragon*, vol. 1, #2 (June 1985), Epic Comics (Marvel Comics imprint). Not CCA approved.

Levitz, Paul (w) and Greg LaRocque (a). "Dead End." *Legion of Super-Heroes*, vol. 3, #22 (May 1986), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Moore, Alan (w) and Dave Gibbons (a). "Absent Friends." *Watchmen*, vol. 1, #2 (October 1986), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Claremont, Chris (w) and Jackson Guice (a). "We Were Only Foolin." *The New Mutants*, vol. 1, #45 (November 1986), Marvel Comics. Not CCA approved.

Barr, Mike W. (a) and Alan Davis (w). "The Last Laugh!" *Detective Comics*, vol. 1, #570 (January 1987), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Mantlo, Bill (w) and June Brigman (a). "Resurrection." *Alpha Flight*, vol. 1, #45 (April 1987), Marvel Comics. CCA approved.

Moench, Doug (a) and Paul Gulacy (W). "Damazons and the Family Unit." *Slash Maraud*, vol. 1, #2 (December 1987), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Englehart, Steve (w) and Joe Staton (a). "Under." *Millennium*, vol. 1, #2 (January 1988), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Moench, Doug (w) and Gray Morrow (a). "Housewarming Party." *Spectre*, vol. 2, #11 (February 1988), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Byrne, John (w/a). "Wings." *Superman*, vol. 2, #15 (March 1988), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Delano, Jamie (w) and John Ridgway (a). "Going for It." *Hellblazer*, vol. 1, #3 (March 1988), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Grell, Mike (w) and Ed Hannigan (a). "Gauntlet." *Green Arrow*, vol. 2, #5-6 (June-July 1988), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Englehart, Steve (w), Cary Bates (w) and Joe Staton (a). *The New Guardians*, vol. 1, #1-12 (September 1988-September 1989), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Claremont, Chris (w) and Craig T. Hamilton (a). "Deal With The Devil!" *Marvel Fanfare*, vol. 1, #40 (October 1988), Marvel Comics. CCA approved.

Moore, Alan (w) and David Lloyd (a). "Valerie." *V for Vendetta*, vol. 1, #6 (October 1988), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Pasko, Martin (w) and Frank Springer (a). "The Sound of a Silent Heart." *Action Comics*, vol. 1, #624 (November 1988), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

Ostrander, John (w) and Luke McDonnell (a). "Personal Files--Amanda Waller." *Suicide Squad*, vol. 1, #19 (November 1988), DC Comics. CCA approved.

Gaiman, Neil (w) and Mike Dringenberg (a). "24 Hours." *Sandman*, vol. 2, #6 (June 1989), DC Comics. Not CCA approved.

1990s

Gruenwald, Mark (w) and Ron Lim (a). "A Clockwork Origin." *Captain America*, vol. 1, #368 (March 1990), Marvel Comics.

Morrison, Grant (w) and Richard Case (a). "The Soul of a New Machine." *Doom Patrol*, vol. 1, #34 (July 1990), DC Comics.

Claremont, Chris (w) and Bill Jaaska (a). "Storm." *Uncanny X-Men*, vol. 1, #265 (Early August 1990), Marvel Comics.

Messner-Loebs, William (w) and Greg LaRocque (a). "Fast Friends." *Flash*, vol. 2, #53 (August 1991), DC Comics.

Gaiman, Neil (w) and Shawn McManus (a). "Slaughter on Fifth Avenue." *Sandman*, vol. 2, #32 (November 1991), DC Comics.

Shetterly, Will (w) and Vince Stone (a). "Crossroad." *Captain Confederacy*, vol. 1, #1 (November 1991), DC Comics.

David, Peter (w) and Dale Keown (p). "Thicker than Water." *The Incredible Hulk*, vol. 1, #388 (December 1991), Marvel Comics.

Smith, John (w) and Sean Phillips (a). "Counting To Ten." *Hellblazer*, vol. 1, #51 (March 1992), DC Comics.

Lobdell, Scott (w) and Mark Pacella (p). "The Walking Wounded." *Alpha Flight*, vol. 1, #106 (March 1992), Marvel Comics.

Bierbaum, Mary (w), Tom Bierbaum (w), Keith Giffen (w/a), Curt Swan (a), and Colleen Doran (a). "Terra Mosaic." *Legion of Super-Heroes*, vol. 4, #31 (July 1992), DC Comics.

Milligan, Peter (w) and Chris Bachalo (a). "Lenny's Story." *Shade, the Changing Man*, vol. 2, #26 (August 1992), DC Comics.

Milligan, Peter (w) and Colleen Doran (a). "Hermaphrodite." *Shade, the Changing Man*, vol. 2, #27 (September 1992), DC Comics.

- Joyner, Tom (w), K.S. Wilson (w), and Chris Sprouse (a). "Now These Her Princes." *Hammerlocke*, vol. 1, #1 (September 1992), DC Comics.
- Dooley, Kevin (w) and Andy Smith (a). "The Real Return of the...Global Guardians!" *Justice League Quarterly*, vol. 1, #8 (September 1992), DC Comics.
- Cooper, Christian (w) and Richard Case (a). "Black Letter." *Darkhold*, vol. 1, #1 (October 1992), Marvel Comics.
- Jones, Gerard (w) and Tim Hamilton (a). "The Ashes Fall." *Wonder Man*, vol. 1, #18 (February 1993), Marvel Comics.
- Nicieza, Fabian (w) and Rick Mays (a). "Criss Cross." *Nomad*, vol. 2, #11 (March 1993), Marvel Comics.
- Morrison, Grant (w) and Steve Yeowell (a). *Sebastian O*, vol. 1, #1-3 (May 1993-July 1993), Vertigo (DC Comics imprint).
- Milligan, Peter (w) and Duncan Fegredo (a). "Episode 4: And Then What?" *Enigma*, vol. 1, #4 (June 1993), Vertigo (DC Comics imprint).
- Ennis, Garth (w) and Steve Dillion (a). *Hellblazer*, vol. 1, #68-69 (August 1993-September 1993), Vertigo (DC Comics imprint).
- Pollack, Rachel (w) and Scot Eaton (a). "The Laughing Game." *Doom Patrol*, vol. 2, #70 (September 1993), Vertigo (DC Comics imprint).
- Velez, Ivan, Jr. (w) and ChrisCross (a). *Blood Syndicate*, vol. 1, #8 (November 1993), Milestone Comics (DC Comics imprint).
- Velez, Ivan, Jr. (w) and ChrisCross (a). "After the Fox." *Blood Syndicate*, vol. 1, #10 (January 1994), Milestone Comics (DC Comics imprint).
- David, Peter (w) and Gary Frank (a). "Part Animals." *The Incredible Hulk*, vol. 1, #417 (May 1994), Marvel Comics.
- Nicieza, Fabian (w) and Richard Pace (a), John Czop (a), Guy Dorian (a), and Darick Robertson (a). "The More Things Change..." *New Warriors*, vol. 1, #48 (June 1994), Marvel Comics.
- Rawson, Dave (w) and Greg LaRocque (a). "The Fighting Ugly American." *Fighting American*, vol. 2, #6 (July 1994), DC Comics.
- Washington, Robert L., III (w) and John Paul Leon (a). "Female Trouble." *Shadow Cabinet*, vol. 1, #2 (July 1994), Milestone Comics (DC Comics imprint).

- Edginton, Ian (w) and Doug Wheatley (a). "Red Prophet." *Blade: The Vampire Hunter*, vol. 1, #2 (August 1994), Marvel Comics.
- David, Peter (w) and Gary Frank (a). "Lest Darkness Come." *The Incredible Hulk*, vol. 1, #420 (August 1994), Marvel Comics.
- Washington, Robert L., III (w), Ivan Velez, Jr. (w), Wilfred (a). "What Are Little Boys Made Of?" *Static*, vol. 1, #16-20 (October 1994-February 1995), Milestone Comics (DC Comics imprint).
- Morrison, Grant (w) and Steve Yeowell (a). "Down and Out in Heaven and Hell." *The Invisibles*, vol. 1, #2 (October 1994), Vertigo (DC Comics imprint).
- Blaustein, Maddie (w), Yves Fezzani (w), and J.H. Williams III (a). "This Ain't No Cryin' Game." *Deathwish*, vol. 1, #1 (December 1994), DC Comics.
- Barr, Mike W. (w) and Paul Pelletier (a). "Island Girls." *The Outsiders*, vol. 2, #16 (March 1995), DC Comics.
- Choi, Brandon (w) and J. Scott Campbell (w/a). "Beach Blanket Brawl." *Gen¹³*, vol. 2, #2 (May 1995), Image Comics.
- Dixon, Buzz (w) and Eduardo Savid (a). "The Old Switcheroo." *Disney's Aladdin*, vol. 1, #8 (May 1995), Marvel Comics.
- Isabella, Tony (w) and Eddy Newell (a). "Blowed Away." *Black Lightning*, vol. 2, #5 (June 1995), DC Comics.
- Jones, Gerard (w) and Chuck Wojtkiewicz (a). "New Devils for Old." *Justice League America*, vol. 1, #110 (April 1996), DC Comics.
- Wojnarowicz, David (w), Romberger, James (a), and Marguerite Van Cook (a). *7 Miles A Second*. Ed. James Romberger. New York: Vertigo Verité (DC Comics imprint), March 1996.
- Ostrander, John (w) and John Ridgway (a). "Acts of God." *Spectre*, vol. 3, #45 (September 1996), DC Comics.
- Claremont, Chris (w) and Dusty Abell (a). "The Price." *Superman/Wonder Woman: Whom Gods Destroy*, vol. 1, #4 (1997), DC Comics.
- Jimenez, Phil (w/a). "Requiem." *Tempest*, vol. 1, #4 (February 1997), DC Comics.
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Brenda Writer (w) and Sarah Artist (a). “Comic-Book Title.” *Comics Series*, vol. #, issue # (Cover Date), Publisher.

Following the precedent set by José Alaniz in *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*, I provide in-text citation for all comics (but no other sources), so as to allow readers the quickest familiarity with texts that may not be well known to them, or easy to find. In-text citations read as follows:

“Comic-Book Title” (*Comics Series*, vol. #, issue #, Cov. Date, Writer/Artist, Publisher).

For a number of reasons major comic book companies occasionally publish comics via imprints, which are often devoted to a specific purpose (e.g. DC’s Vertigo Comics is used for adult-themed content). In the citations below I retain the original imprint through which a comic was published, and place the company name in parentheses. Occasionally a comic is given an unusual release date, such as “Holiday 1988” or “Early August 1990,” which I retain in my citations.

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